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RESEARCHES ON THE HISTORY OF THE  
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presented in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

1900





BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

CHAUCER'S USE OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN AS CHARACTERS  
IN HIS STORIES

by

Margaret Sarah Locke

(A.B., Boston University, 1911)

submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## Outline

Introduction	1
I. Characterization of individuals	
A. Women	2
1. Individual characterizations	2
Prioress	2
Wife of Bath	10
Emily	18
Constance	22
Virginia	27
Griselda	29
Dorise	37
2. Comparisons	41
B. Children	43
1. Individual characterizations	
Constance's baby	43
Griselda's children	44
Clergeon	44
Older clergeon	45
II. Customs, ideals, conventions regarding women, with respect to:	
Education	47
Love and marriage	49
Home life	53
Children	55
Dress and personal belongings	56
Occupations	59
Amusements	61
Religion	63
Personal character	65
III. Significance	67
Summary	70
Bibliography	73

Outline

I	Introduction
2	1. Characterization of individuals
3	2. Women
4	3. Individual characteristics
5	4. Priorities
10	5. Wife of Bath
18	6. Early
22	7. Conscience
27	8. Virtues
33	9. Graces
37	10. Dignity
41	11. Comparisons
43	12. Children
45	13. Individual characteristics
46	14. Conscience's baby
47	15. Graces's children
48	16. Graces
49	17. Older Graces
50	18. Customs, ideals, conventions regarding women, with respect to:
51	19. Education
52	20. Love and marriage
53	21. Home life
54	22. Children
55	23. Dress and personal belongings
56	24. Occupations
57	25. Amusements
58	26. Religion
59	27. Personal character
60	28. III. Significance
61	29. Summary
62	30. Bibliography
63	



## Introduction

Chaucer opens a window upon life through which his readers can see the persons and events of five-hundred years ago. The women who appear there are vivid, and, in some respects, familiar.<sup>1</sup> Among them we recognize the aspiring one, the yielding, the self-assertive, the lonely, the saint, the model girl, the disciple of Expressionism, the victim of an inferiority complex. Pleasing as they are in their similarities to the women of our time, they are even more interesting in their contrasts. The Pilgrims who consumed from two to four days ambling fifty-five miles had a different outlook from us whose overflowing lives are measured by activity and speed. Their personalities, shaped by medieval environment, delight or irritate, but certainly impress, us, their successors living half a millenary later.

1. Manly, Some new light on Chaucer, p. 295.

## Introduction

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## The Prioresse

Thomas Egerton, the Prior, granted the company of pilgrims who left the Tabard Inn at Southwark one April morning in the fourteenth century to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas at Canterbury. She had come, it is inferred, from the Benedictine convent of Saint Leonard's, near Stratford, and was accompanied by another nun, who served her as chaplain and secretary, and by at least one priest. Dressed with quiet, reserved

### I. Characterization of individuals

they walked along. Indeed, she was excellent company, "of good cheer", and "ful of grace and mirth" of bearing.

The prioresse was of large stature with fair forehead almost a span broad, slender nose, blue eyes and small, soft red mouth. She wore a neat black cloak with an ascending plaited fringe of white linen. From her ear hung a rosary of coral and green beads with a brooch like a pendant of shining gold. On the brooch was engraved an ornament with a crown, and the motto, Agna Fidei Omnia.

She was an accomplished woman, Chaucer says, as one in her position must have been.

Full wel she song the services divyne,  
Retuned in hir nose ful swete.

1. Early Canterbury tales, p. 204; Some new light, p. 203.
2. All quotations from the text of Chaucer are taken from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. by Walter W. Skeat.

I. Characterization of individuals



## The Prioress

Madam Eglentyne, the Prioress, graced the company of pilgrims who left the Tabard Inn at Southwark one April morning in the fourteenth century to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. She had come, it is inferred, from the Benedictine convent of Saint Leonard's, near Stratford<sup>1</sup>, and was accompanied by another nun, who served her as chaplain and secretary, and by at least one priest. Smiling with quiet, reserved dignity, she joined cordially in the conversation as they ambled along. Indeed, she was excellent company, "of greet disport"<sup>2</sup>, and "ful plesaunt and amiable" of bearing.

The Prioress was of large stature with fair forehead almost a span broad, slender nose, blue eyes and small, soft red mouth. She wore a neat black cloak with an accordion plaited wimple of white linen. From her arm hung a rosary of coral and green beads with a brooch like a pendant of shining gold. On the brooch was engraved an A ornamented with a crown, and the motto, Amor Vincit Omnia.

She was an accomplished woman, Chaucer says, as one in her position must have been.

Ful wel she song the service divyne,  
Entuned in hir nose ful semely.

1. Manly, Canterbury tales, p. 504; Some new light, p. 203.

2. All quotations from the text of Chaucer are taken from The Student's Chaucer, ed. by Walter W. Skeat.



## The Prioress

Madam Eglentyne, the Prioress, graced the company of pilgrims who left the Tabard Inn at Southwark one April morning in the fourteenth century to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury. She had come, it is inferred, from the Benedictine convent of Saint Leonard's, near Stratford, and was accompanied by another nun, who served her as chaplain and secretary, and by at least one priest. Smiling with quiet reserve and dignity, she joined cordially in the conversation as they ambled along. Indeed, she was excellent company, "of great import", and "ful pleasant and amiable" of bearing.

The Prioress was of large stature with fair forehead almost as open broad, slender nose, blue eyes and small, soft red mouth. She wore a neat black cloak with an accordion plaited wimple of white linen. From her arm hung a rosary of coral and green beads with a brooch like a pendant of shining gold. On the brooch was engraved an A ornamented with a crown, and the motto, Amor Vincit Omnia.

She was an accomplished woman, Chaucer says, as one in her position must have been.

For well she song the service divine,  
And turned in hire nose ful gently.

1. Henry, Canterbury tales, p. 504; some new light, p. 203.  
2. All quotations from the text of Chaucer are taken from the Student's Chaucer, ed. by Walter W. Skeat.



Such a nasal chant was customary and particularly correct.<sup>1</sup> She spoke French easily, but it was the dialect taught at the convent school of Stratford; with Parisian French she was unacquainted. Her table manners were faultless according to the practice of the best society and the instruction of the etiquette books.<sup>2</sup> Her story indicates that she was enthusiastic about music--"the only Pilgrim to make the theme of her tale a fine art".<sup>3</sup> "In her office as head of a priory of nuns she needed much judgment and discretion, firmness, sense of order and capacity for management. The success of the house, the comfort and religious progress of the sisters and the entertainment of strangers and pilgrims would largely depend upon her".<sup>4</sup>

Sister Madeleva explains "a homely, human reason for the Prioress's carefulness at table. She was wearing not only a clean, but a new habit, which she would be expected to give up on her return to her convent." A spot upon her garment causes a Sister much distress, for "a spot without is a spot within". "Is it any wonder that she was so effectively solicitous 'that no drope ne fille up-on hir brest'?" Moreover, "Ful semely after hir mete she raughte" because it was her custom to be abstemious.<sup>5</sup>

Although an able and efficient executive, the Prioress, when removed from her monastic environment, manifested a shallow and self-centered character. "The key to her character is

1. Manly, Some new light, p. 217.
2. Manly, Canterbury tales, p. 504.
3. Hinckley, Chaucer's Prioress, p. xxvii
4. Ward, Canterbury pilgrimages, p. 187.
5. Wolff, Chaucer's nuns, pp. 13-15.



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1. Manly, *Some new light*, p. 217.
2. Manly, *Conventual tales*, p. 204.
3. Rinkley, *Chaucer's Prioress*, p. xxvii.
4. Ward, *Conventual tales*, p. 187.
5. Ward, *Chaucer's works*, pp. 18-19.



esthetic, not moral. She studies the art of conduct, or etiquette, without especially understanding its meaning"<sup>1</sup>. "She would always follow the line of least resistance....She is too well-bred ever to think for herself, and too innocent and simple-minded not to accept life as it is offered her."<sup>2</sup> She is "compounded of many affectations". Her highest ambition was to be deemed worthy of reverence, and to this end she took pains to imitate manners of the court, bearing herself in a stately, dignified way. But outward appearances are not enough; "the true measure of her character is to be found in the fuller revelation of her tale."<sup>3</sup>

The Prioress's name may be an expression of her character for there is probability that she chose it herself. Eglentyne, as Sister Madeleva points out, is just what a little girl would give her favorite doll.<sup>4</sup> There seems to be still something of the little girl's immaturity of taste and interests in the woman's make-up.

Several "smale houndes", that accompanied their mistress on her religious pilgrimage, are evidence pointing to the Prioress's self-indulgence. Church law forbade nuns to keep dogs at all, though if she were elderly, the law would be relaxed, but this was one of the ways in which she was aping court ladies. Church authorities also strongly disapproved of the travelling about of nuns and monks; even religious pilgrimages were

1. Hinckley, Chaucer's Prioress, p. xxvii.

2. Hadow, Chaucer and his times, p. 137.

3. Root, Poetry of Chaucer, p. 190.

4. Wolff, Chaucer's nuns, p. 8.



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1. Hinchley, *Chaucer's Prioress*, p. xxvii.
2. Hadow, *Chaucer and his times*, p. 137.
3. Root, *Poetry of Chaucer*, p. 190.
4. Wolff, *Chaucer's nuns*, p. 8.



forbidden to nuns.<sup>1</sup> It is easy to see how the benefit that might be gained from visiting a shrine would be more than counteracted, in the opinion of the Church, by intercourse with such corrupting persons as made up a considerable proportion of the present company. Association with the Pardoner, the Somnour, the Miller and the Wife of Bath would hardly conduce to edification. A popular saying was that a monk out of his cloister was like a fish out of water, but Chaucer's Monk held that text "nat worth an oistre". Possibly the simple and coy Prioress shared his indifference.

A detail of her dress reveals another case of laxity with regard to Church authority. Her veil, according to rule, should have been fastened to cover her forehead.<sup>2</sup> This rule she must have ignored; otherwise, Chaucer would not have known that her forehead was fair and almost a span broad.

She was so charitable that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap or bleeding. The small dogs she fed sumptuously on roasted meat, milk or fine wheat bread; such a custom would have been an unjustifiable extravagance, Sister Madeleva thinks, unless the food were picked up from the table at the close of the meal.<sup>3</sup> It is hard to visualize a prim Sister who studies to counterfeit cheer of court doing that, but perhaps she only superintended the feeding. She wept sorely if one of the pets came to grief, yet, it is difficult to imagine

1. Power, Medieval people, p. 79.

2. Ibid., p. 77.

3. Wolff, Chaucer's nuns, p. 15.



forbidden to nurse.<sup>1</sup> It is easy to see how the benefit that might be gained from visiting a shrine would be more than counteracted in the opinion of the Church, by intercourse with such corrupt persons as made up a considerable proportion of the present company. Association with the barbers, the bonnet, the Miller and the Wife of Bath would hardly conduce to edification. A popular saying was that a monk out of his cloister was like a fish out of water, but Chaucer's Monk held that text "not worth an oyster". Possibly the simple and gay Friar shared his indifference.

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She was so charitable that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap or bleeding. The small dogs she fed eagerly on roasted meat, milk or fine wheat bread; such a custom would have been an unjustifiable extravagance. Sister Madeline thinks, unless the food were picked up from the table at the close of the meal.<sup>3</sup> It is hard to visualize a prioress who studied to counteract sheer of court doing that, but perhaps she only superintended the feeding. She wept sorely if one of the cats came to grief, yet, it is difficult to imagine

1. *Power, Medieval people*, p. 75.  
2. *Ibid.*, p. 77.  
3. *Wells, Chaucer's monks*, p. 13.



that her sympathy, like Canacee's, would take the practical form of applying salves or binding up wounds".<sup>1</sup>

Her greatest oath was the relatively innocent one, "By Saint Loy". "Could there be a sweeter or more ladylike expletive?" asks Kittredge; "it is soft and liquid, and above all it does not distort the lips."<sup>2</sup> Was it because of modesty and piety that in this respect the Prioress did not imitate her royal and ecclesiastical contemporaries who emphasized their words with strong profanity? Rather, Saint Loy may have been her favorite saint, for he was "an artist and a courtier and a saint, a man of great physical beauty, and a lover in his earlier days of personal adornment". He was famous as a master workman in precious metals, particularly in the adorning of sacred objects.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Queen Philippa's influence may have made him popular in England.<sup>4</sup>

"Was she religious?" "Perhaps", Power believes, "but save for her singing the divine service and for her lovely address to the Virgin at the beginning of her tale, Chaucer can find but little to say on the part."<sup>5</sup> Root, on the other hand, thinks "her affectations are only on the surface. Her legend of the 'litel clergeon' breathes the spirit of earnest, heartfelt religion, and shows that the tenderness of her heart is not confined to the sufferings of a wounded mouse, or a favorite lapdog, but makes her keenly susceptible to the truest pathos....

1. Hadow, Chaucer and his times, p.136.

2. Chaucer and his poetry, p.177.

3. Lowes, Prioress's oath, pp.369-375.

4. Manly, Canterbury tales, p.505.

5. Medieval people, p.83.



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1. Hadow, Chaucer and his times, p. 136.

2. Chaucer and his poetry, p. 177.

3. Lowes, "Princess's oath", pp. 363-375.

4. Manly, Canterbury tales, p. 505.

5. Medieval legends, p. 85.



we find in her invocation....a sincere Christian humility".<sup>1</sup>

That she should tell a religious story is to be expected, but why she chose this rather than some other of the many legends of saints, opens an interesting question. Kittredge sees an expression of motherliness; "her heart goes out, in yearnings which she does not comprehend or try to analyze, to little dogs and little boys at school. Nowhere is the poignant trait of thwarted motherhood so affecting as in this character of the Prioress".<sup>2</sup> She preludes her story with an invocation to Mary in the words of familiar Psalms and prayers. Sister Madeleva suggests that Chaucer when a little clergeon himself may have listened to this tale from the lips of some nun, since the theme was well known in his time:<sup>3</sup> how a little Christian boy was killed by the Jews out of race and religious hatred. It appealed to the nun, doubtless, because it roused pity for the helpless child, and because it reflected glory to the Virgin.

The critics agree that the Abbess's story is charming and well told. Chaucer "had thought it well to atone for the little gibes in the Prologue at the Prioress's coquettishness of way and dress by the pure and unfeigned pathos and piety of her tale".<sup>4</sup> She "tells her story with real tenderness and feeling."<sup>5</sup> Her tale left the company surprisingly sober.

Her reputation among members of the group seems favorable.

1. Poetry of Chaucer, p. 191.
2. Chaucer and his poetry, p. 178.
3. Chaucer's nuns, p. 37.
4. Cambridge history, v. II, p. 208.
5. Hadow, Chaucer and his times, p. 137.



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Her reputation among members of the group seems favorable.

1. Poetry of Chaucer, p. 191.
2. Chaucer and his poetry, p. 178.
3. Chaucer's works, p. 37.
4. Chaucer's history, v. 11, p. 208.
5. Chaucer and his times, p. 137.



Many of them would think none the less of her for being "a good mixer". Even in her laxity, too, she hardly equalled the worldly Monk, and surely did not approach the deceitful and vulgar Pardoner. Besides, her dainty, feminine charm would hide her shallowness. That she won the honor she so much desired, at least in some quarters, is evident from the Host's deferential manner. Immediately after a hearty speech to his "Felawes", he courteously and gently addressed her thus:

My lady Prioress, by your leve,  
 So that I wiste I sholde yow nat greve,  
 I wolde demen that ye tellen sholde  
 A tale, next, if so were that ye wolde.  
 Now wol ye vouche-sauf, my lady dere?

So definite and clear a picture does Chaucer draw that we conclude some real person must have been the model in his mind. Typical, too, the Prioress very likely was of many women in her profession in the fourteenth century. Sister Madeleva puts a wholly complimentary construction on the account, thinking of her as "sweetened and spiritually transformed by the rules and religious practices of her choice, who can be in the world without being of it, gracious without affectation, and friendly without boldness".<sup>1</sup> Another commentator believes Chaucer admires the Prioress's personal appearance but "treats her conduct with urbane irony....especially in her excessiv demonstrativeness about small animals".<sup>2</sup> Kittredge thinks he had no intention of ridiculing her table manners,<sup>3</sup> but Manly believes he is poking

1. Wolff, Chaucer's nuns, p. 21.

2. Cambridge history, v. II, p. 208.

3. Chaucer and his poetry, p. 177.



Many of them would think none the less of her for being "a good mixer". Even in her family, too, she hardly equalled the world-ly Monk, and surely did not approach the dissipated and vulgar Taborer. Besides, her daintiness, feminine charm would hide her shallowness. That she won the honor she so much desired, at least in some quarters, is evident from the Host's deferential manner. Immediately after a hearty speech to his "Beloved", he courteously and gently addressed her thus:

My lady Priorress, by your leave,  
So that I wiste I shold be your next  
I wolde haue that ye taller shold be  
A tale, next, if so were that ye wolde.  
Now wol ye vouchsaunt, my lady dere?

So definite and clear a picture does Chaucer draw that we conclude some real person must have been the model in his mind. Typical, too, the Priorress very likely was of many women in her profession in the fourteenth century. Sister Walsheve puts a wholly complimentary construction on the account, thinking of her as "sweetened and spiritually transformed by the rules and religious practices of her choice, who can be in the world without being of it, gracious without affectation, and friendly without boldness".<sup>1</sup> Another commentator believes Chaucer admires the Priorress's personal appearance but "treats her conduct with urbane irony.... especially in her excessively demonstrativeness about small animals".<sup>2</sup> Kitteredge thinks he had no intention of ridiculing her table manners,<sup>3</sup> but Manly believes he is poking

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2. Cambridge History, v. II, p. 208.  
3. Chaucer and his poetry, p. 177.



fun at the French spoken at Stratford.<sup>1</sup> Without doubt Chaucer is amused at her affectation in aping court manners, at her self-indulgence, at her presumption in supposing that she knew the best French, at her sentimentality over small animals, at her vanity and love of good appearance, at her negligence about keeping vows with respect to dress, pets and travelling about. He sees her lacking in keenness of intellect and depth of character but possessing fine qualities of heart, nevertheless, as is evidenced by her story.

Let stockings and skirt her hips covered the fine manner  
 completed the outfit. She rode upon an ambling nag. This was  
 Dame Griselda, a well-to-do housewife and weaver from a suburb  
 of Bath.

Though she had lost her youth and beauty, it could be seen  
 that she had been a handsome woman. It did her heart good to  
 remember that she had had her "world as in" her "youth", and that  
 even at forty she had been lively and fair, rich and youthful and  
 young at heart. Indeed, she still,

loved to be gay,  
 and for to walk in March, April and May  
 when blow to blow, to have country tale,

and to "goon to pilgrimage...to ferre halles". Her spirit  
 was still youthful; she would strive to be right merry.

She participated hilariously in the fellowship of the Pil-  
 grims, laughing and carrying and contributing queer jokes in a  
 high, vibrant voice. She liked to talk and when she had once  
 been given the floor, there was no stopping her until she had

1. Canterbury tales, p.505.

For at the French spoken at Stratford.<sup>1</sup> Without doubt Chaucer  
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### Wife of Bath

In the company of Canterbury Pilgrims rode a conspicuous figure very unlike the Prioress. She was a large, robust, red-faced woman of advanced middle age, gat-toothed and deaf. Her costume, somewhat old-fashioned, included a hood and wimple surmounted by an enormous black hat, broad as a shield. The riding skirt which bulged around her hips covered the fine scarlet stockings and moist new shoes which she wore. Silver spurs completed the outfit. She rode upon an ambling nag. This was Dame Alysoun, a well-to-do housewife and weaver from a suburb of Bath.

Though she had lost her youth and beauty, it could be seen that she had been a handsome woman. It did her heart good to remember that she had had her "world as in" her "tyme", and that even at forty she had been lusty and fair, rich and youthful and merry of heart. Indeed, she still,

lovede to be gay,  
And for to walke in March, Averille and May  
From hous to hous, to here sondry talis,

and to "goon on pilgrimages....to ferne halwes". Her spirit was still youthful; she would strive to be right merry.

She participated hilariously in the fellowship of the Pilgrims, laughing and carping and contributing coarse jokes in a high, strident voice. She liked to talk and when she had once been given the floor, there was no stopping her until she had finished. This the other Pilgrims probably understood, and



## Wife of Bath

In the company of Canterbury pilgrims rode a conspicuous figure very unlike the friars. She was a large, robust, red-faced woman of advanced middle age, fat-footed and deaf. Her costume, somewhat old-fashioned, included a hood and wimple surmounted by an enormous black hat, broad as a shield. The riding skirt which hugged around her hips covered the fine scarlet stockings and moist new shoes which she wore. Silver spurs completed the outfit. She rode upon an smiling nag. This was Dame Alvyson, a well-to-do housewife and weaver from a suburb of Bath.

Though she had lost her youth and beauty, it could be seen that she had been a handsome woman. It did her heart good to remember that she had had her "world as in" her "youth", and that even at forty she had been lusty and fair, rich and youthful and merry of heart. Indeed, she still,

loved to be gay,  
and for to walk in March, April and May  
from house to house, to have songy tales,

and to "goon on pilgrimages....to kerne helwes", her spirit was still youthful; she would strive to be right merry. She participated hilariously in the fellowship of the pilgrims, laughing and carrying and contradicting coarse jokes in a high, strident voice. She liked to talk and when she had once been given the floor, there was no stopping her until she had finished. This the other pilgrims probably understood, and



permitted her to continue unmolested except for the Pardoner's interruption to compliment her preaching. She begged them not to be offended at what she said, for her intention was to amuse.

Before beginning her story she launched out on a lengthy discourse about her love affairs and marriages. The confession she made was not in penitence, as one might suppose from the devout purpose of the journey. Manly points out that "self-revelations or confessions were a conventional device of medieval literature....to bring out experiences and traits of character which under ordinary circumstances the person....would never think of revealing".<sup>1</sup> "She would not talk in that unbridled fashion, she would not be so loud of speech if she were not 'som-del deaf'. The way in which she speaks of her prowess as a domestic tyrant warns us at once that it should be put down to boasting. She is anxious to startle and shock the other Pilgrims. All her confidences are a sort of game, for she wishes to amuse her hearers....We do not know whether what she says of herself is true or exaggerated, or partly invention."<sup>2</sup> At any rate, her own affairs filled her mind and led her to autobiographical revelations.

Experience had furnished her authority to speak of the "wo that is in mariage". "Housbondes at chirche-dore she hadde fyve" since twelve years of age, not to mention other love affairs "in youthe". She could not agree with those who said one marriage was enough, or that it was better not to marry; it was not

1. Manly, Canterbury tales, p. 574.

2. Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 174.



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Experience had furnished her authority to speak of the "wo-  
 that is in marriage". "Husband as at child-birth she had five  
 since twelve years of age, not to mention other love affairs "in  
 youth". She could not agree with those who said one marriage  
 was enough, or that it was better not to marry; it was not

1. Mary, *Confessions*, p. 574.  
 2. Legouis, *Geoffrey Hamlyn*, p. 174.



intended that all should be alike; as for her, she preferred to marry; let those who thought otherwise, refrain. Granted that virginity is the ideal, she had no expectation of being perfect anyway. So, "Welcom the sixte whan that ever he shal".

Three of her husbands were "gode and riche and olde". They loved her so well, that she set no value on their affection, but since she had them wholly in her hand, and since they had given her all their property, why should she put herself out to please them? A wise woman, she said, could make her husband believe anything, and she gave a sample of the tirades that she was wont to direct to hers. The three old men she had managed with a high hand; the last two were a match for her, though in the end, she boasted, she always got her own way. Of the fourth she said that she had been "in erthe....his purgatorie". The fifth she had married for love and not for riches, and she had loved him best because he was hard to please. He made her thoroughly angry, however, by continually reading from his book slanderous stories and derogatory proverbs about women, until one day, in exasperation, she tore a leaf from the book. Jankin retaliated by striking such a blow upon her ear as to cause deafness. Finally, after one such brawl, in which he thought he had killed her, she continued:

He yaf me al the brydel in myn hond  
To han the governance of hous and lond  
And of his tonge and of his hond also....  
And whan that I hadde gotten un-to me,  
By maistrie, al the soveraynetee....  
After that day we hadden never debaat",

but lived very happily. Having implied that woman ought always



intended that all should be alike; as for her, she preferred to marry; let those who thought otherwise, refrain. Granted that virginity is the ideal, she had no expectation of being perfect anyway. So, "Welcome the sister when that ever he shall".

Three of her husbands were "good and rich and old". They loved her so well, that she set no value on their affection, but since she had them wholly in her hand, and since they had given her all their property, why should she put herself out to please them? A wise woman, she said, could make her husband believe anything, and she gave a sample of the tricks that she was wont to direct to hers. The three old men she had managed with a high hand; the last two were a match for her, though in the end, she boasted, she always got her own way. Of the fourth she said that she had been "in exile... his purgatory". The fifth she had married for love and not for riches, and she had loved him best because he was hard to please. He made her thoroughly angry, however, by continually reading from his book slenderous stories and derogatory proverbs about women, until one day, in exasperation, she tore a leaf from the book. Retaliated by striking such a blow upon her ear as to cause deafness. Finally, after one such brawl, in which he thought he had killed her, she continued:

He put me at the pyre in my hand  
To have the governance of house and land  
And of his tongue and of his hand also....  
And when that I had a gotten me to me,  
By mistake, at the governance....  
After that day we had never debate.

but lived very happily. Having implied that woman ought always



to hold the mastery, the Wife was ready to develop the theme in her story.

One of King Arthur's knights was given the task of finding out what it is that women desire most. After a year's questioning of all sorts of persons, he returned with an answer which won the judges' approval:

Wommen desyren to have sovereyntee  
As wel over hir housbond as hir love  
And for to ben in maistrie him above.

Whereupon, the old hag who had whispered the true answer to him claimed the right of marrying him. After demurring and wailing for a time, he finally acquiesced out of a sense of honor. Like the Wife of Bath herself, the old woman harangued on the subject of true nobility. In contrast to birth or position, "thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone". She asked him to choose whether he would have her foul and old but faithful to him, or young and fair and unfaithful. When he left the choice to her, she was so pleased at winning the mastery, that she promised to become both fair and good. And so it turned out, and they lived in perfect joy to the end of their lives. As a final wish, the narrator hoped that Providence would send us husbands young and meek, with grace to rule them, that early death might come to those who would not be governed by their wives, and a very pestilence to old and wrathful niggards.

Hinckley thinks the Wife's talk "strongly partakes of the nature of a marriage advertizement. She states her terms and conditions, gives her history and quotes the testimony of five husbands as to the satisfaction she has given." He may be right



to hold the mastery, the Wife was ready to develop the theme in her story.

One of King Arthur's knights was given the task of finding out what it is that women desire most. After a year's questioning of all sorts of persons, he returned with an answer which won the judges' approval:

Women desire to have sovereignty  
As well over their husbands as their love  
And for to see in mastery him above.

Thereupon, the old hag who had whispered the true answer to him claimed the right of marrying him. After bawling and wailing for a time, he finally acquiesced out of a sense of honor. Like the Wife of Bath herself, the old woman bargained on the subject of true nobility. In contrast to birth or position, "thy gentleness cometh fro God alone". She asked him to choose whether he would have her foul and old but faithful to him, or young and fair and unfaithful. When he left the choice to her, she was so pleased at winning the mastery, that she promised to become both fair and good. And so it turned out, and they lived in perfect joy to the end of their lives. As a final wish, the narrator hoped that Providence would send us husbands young and meek, with grace to rule them, that early death might come to those who would not be governed by their wives, and a very premature end to old and wretched misgender.

Hinkley thinks the Wife's talk "strongly partakes of the nature of a marriage advertisement. She states her terms and conditions, gives her history and quotes the testimony of five husbands as to the satisfaction she has given." He may be right



in calling her discourse on gentillesse a "good decoy when hunting for husbands",<sup>1</sup> but all else is quite the contrary. She has not talked long before the Pardoner thinks he will postpone marrying, and the other Pilgrims show no haste to pursue her bait. Legouis finds that "an inexhaustible fund of comic effects is supplied by....her contention that woman should be supreme, whilst her whole life is a proof to the contrary."<sup>2</sup>

The Wife's discourse and story prove what she herself declared to be true, that she had a dual nature:

For certes, I am al Venerian  
In felinge, and myn herte is Marcien.  
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,  
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardinesse.

To the influence of Venus was due the predominance of the senses in her nature. Her striking dress, scarlet gowns and stockings, large hats, ponderous coverchiefs, were an expression of her love of beauty, unrefined, to be sure, though, really, she looked "delightfully neat and trim for a middle-class woman of her time".<sup>3</sup> Her tale reveals the esthetic side of her nature, so completely submerged in the ordinary contacts of life. Despite her impatience with Oxford scholars, she respected learning and enjoyed the stories that her fifth husband read her from his library, and she frequently quoted from them in her conversation. Her tale began with mention of the fairies who, hundreds of years before, had been wont to dance full often in many a green mead. Its scene was laid at the court of King

1. Hinckley, Debate on marriage, p. 295.

2. Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 174.

3. Curry, Chaucer and the medieval sciences, p. 111.



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For certes, I am al Venerable  
 In langage, and my herte is baroun.  
 Verna me put my lust, my likerousnesse,  
 And make me my sturdy hardynesse.

To the influence of Venus was due the predominance of the senses  
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1. Kinchley, Debate on marriage, p. 235.  
 2. Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 174.  
 3. Gurr, Chaucer and the medieval sciences, p. 111.



Arthur and it included a classical myth, by way of illustration, and referred to Dante, Seneca, Boethius, and Juvenal. She had a worthy perception of true nobility,

for God of his goodnesse,  
Wol that of him we clayme our gentillesse.

The young knight of the story "so trusted the mind and heart of the ugly old woman forced upon him as a bride that she became young and beautiful in his arms."<sup>1</sup> Grace and fineness touched a chord in Dame Alysoun's nature too soft to be heard amid the predominating harsh notes of daily life.

Mars, the war-god, had bestowed upon her her boldness, wilfulness and passion for mastery, as well as the coarseness of figure and personality. Her domineering spirit involved her inevitably in conflicts with her associates. Such a combination of overbearing temper with sensuousness, had resulted in a hard, selfish character. The environment of her life had fostered the grosser elements and well-nigh overwhelmed the more delicate. In a different atmosphere, she might have become a nobler woman. Possibly she felt the loss herself. "Her laughing and carping, and perhaps her coarseness, are assumed in part as a mask to hide the bitterness which has been forced upon her by an unholy constellation."<sup>2</sup>

The Wife of Bath was a weaver as well as a housewife, by occupation, and was so skilful at her trade, Chaucer says, that she surpassed the weavers of Ypres and Gaunt. The "words about

1. Greenslet, Chaucer's women, p. 53

2. Curry, Chaucer and the medieval sciences, p. 113.



Arthur and it included a classical myth, by way of illustration, and referred to Dante, Seneca, Boetius, and Juvenal. She had a worthy perception of true nobility.

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The young knight of the story "so trusted the mind and heart of the ugly old woman forced upon him as a bride that she became young and beautiful in his arms."<sup>1</sup> Grace and kindness touched a chord in Dame Alyson's nature too soft to be hard and the predominating harsh notes of daily life.

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2. Curry, *Chaucer and the medieval sciences*, p. 113.



skill seem complimentary and sincere....but Chaucer indulges in irony to a degree not always recognized". It had been found expedient that all West-Country cloth should be exposed for sale open, in order that customers might see what they were buying.<sup>1</sup> Though she was a capable woman and succeeded in whatever she attempted, it was not characteristic of her to exercise the extreme care and patience necessary for becoming an expert.

The Wife had already made numerous pilgrimages--to Bologne, Rome, Santiago, Cologne and three to Jerusalem. She liked to go to,

visitaciouns  
To vigilies and to processiouns,  
To preching eek and to thise pilgrimages,

but "every detail of the Wife's character shows that she went on pilgrimages primarily not for religion but for their social advantages".<sup>2</sup>

Moral sense was left out of her nature. Therefore, there was nothing to check her worst impulses of selfishness and sensuality. She had no experience of self-control, of self-sacrifice, of Christian ethics. She respected the authority of the Bible but applied its teachings to suit herself. She went to the offering to make a show, and would permit no one to precede her; if anyone succeeded in doing it,

so wrooth was she,  
That she was out of alle charitee.

Contrary to the true purpose of Lent, she spent that season gossiping with her friends. For lack of this moral sense, her

1. Manly, Some new light, p.229.

2. Ibid., p.230.

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 to villages and to processions.  
 to preaching and to other pilgrimages.

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so smooth was she,  
 that she was out of all character.

Contrary to the true purpose of Lent, she spent that season pos-  
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1. Manly, Some new light, p. 229.  
 2. Ibid., p. 230.



religion was but superficial. She had grasped nothing of its meaning for life.

"The character of Alice of Bath is Chaucer's own creation, and his most thoroughly original one."<sup>1</sup> Such a woman as he here pictures surely could not be typical. Legouis doubts her ever being seen in real life, "because she has more attributes than logic could compass and put together in a single human being"; and yet, "there are certain accents in her voice, certain expressions on her countenance, which force us to regard her as a living person".<sup>2</sup> Presumably, Chaucer is describing an actual weaver whom he knew. The facts of her being gat-toothed, not to mention other characteristics, Manly points out, set her off as unique.<sup>3</sup> "The poet may....have considered her his most tragic figure because--as is certainly the case--she is the most nearly completely human".<sup>4</sup> It is "no occasion for surprise....that her creator, not only a genius but among the most sympathetic of men, should lift the veil for a moment from the secret places of her nature and should have permitted her to tell a story of the most delicate beauty and grace....free from the slightest touch of vulgarity, and containing a long and nobly expressed sermon on what constitutes true 'gentillesse' of heart and life".<sup>5</sup>

1. French, Chaucer handbook, p. 272.

2. Geoffrey Chaucer, pp. 173-4.

3. Manly, Some new light, p. 231.

4. Curry, Chaucer and the medieval sciences, p. 115.

5. Ibid., p. 113.

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"The character of Alice of Bath is Chaucer's own creation, and his most thoroughly original one."<sup>1</sup> Such a woman as he here pictures surely could not be typical. Legend doubts her ever being seen in real life, "because she has more attributes than logic could compass and put together in a single human being"; and yet, "there are certain accents in her voice, certain expressions on her countenance, which force us to regard her as a living person."<sup>2</sup> Presumably, Chaucer is describing an actual

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3. Manly, Some new light, p. 231.
4. Chaucer, Chaucer and the medieval sciences, p. 115.
5. Idem, p. 115.



## Emily

Fairer was to sene  
 Than is the lillie upon his stalke grene,  
 And fressher than the May with floures newe,

was Emily, sister-in-law of Duke Theseus, "of Athens....lord and governour". Emily rose early on bright May mornings and walked in the garden gathering the red and white flowers to make a garland for her head; and "as an aungel heavenly she song". She was daintily dressed; her long golden hair hung in a braid down her back and her cheeks rivalled the roses. In that situation she became the unconscious cause of sorrow and bitter rivalry between two cousins, prisoners of war, committed for life to the Duke's castle dungeon. By chance, Palamon looking sadly through the iron grating, saw Emily and lost his heart at once.

'I was hurt right now thurgh-out myn ye  
 In-to myn herte, that wol my bane be.  
 The fairnesse of that lady that I see  
 Yond in the gardin romen to and fro,  
 Is cause of al my crying and my wo.  
 I noot wher she be womman or goddesse;  
 But Venus is it, soothly, as I gesse.'

Thereupon, Arcite looked and received an equally serious wound.

'The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly  
 Of hir that rometh in the yonder place;  
 And, but I have hir mercy and hir grace,  
 That I may seen hir atte leeste weye,  
 I nam but deed; ther nis namore to seye.'

The fair maiden next appeared years later dressed all in green, a member of a hunting party with her sister and the Duke. They chanced upon a grove where the two cousins, the one banished and the other escaped from prison, were fighting a duel for love of

Emily

After was to see  
Then is the little upon his white green  
And treasure then the way with flowers new

was Emily, sister-in-law of Duke Thomas, "of Athens... lord and  
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in the garden gathering the red and white flowers to make a gar-  
land for her head; and "as an angel heavenly she sang". She was  
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Duke's castle dungeon. By chance, William looking sadly through  
the iron grating, saw Emily and lost his heart at once.

I was hurt right now through-out my  
in-to my heart, that woe my pain be  
The fairness of that lady that I see  
Food in the garden to and fro  
in cause of all my crying and my woe  
I meet when she so woman or goddess;  
But Venus is it, soothly, as I guess.

Thereupon, Emily looked and received an equally serious wound.

The treasure haunted almost me secretly  
Of his that roseth in the tender place;  
And, but I have his mercy and his grace,  
That I may see his little little ways,  
I am but dead; then his name to say.

The fair maiden next appeared years later dressed all in green,  
a member of a hunting party with her sister and the Duke. They  
chanced upon a grove where the two cousins, the one banished and  
the other escaped from prison, were fighting a duel for love of



her. Here Emily first heard of the cousins' passion for her from the lips of Palamon who addressed the Duke thus:

'This is Arcite,  
That fro thy lond is banished on his heed,  
For which he hath deserved to be deed.  
For this is he that came un-to thy gate,  
And seyde, that he highte Philostrate.  
Thus hath he japed thee ful many a yeer,  
And thou hast maked him thy chief squyer....  
... I am thilke woful Palamoun,  
That hath thy prison broken wikkedly.  
I am thy mortal fo, and it am I  
That loveth so hote Emily the brighte  
That I wol die present in hir sighte.'

When the irate Duke, thereupon, summarily pronounced judgment of death, Emily and the other ladies fell upon their knees and begged for mercy, for thought they,

Gret pitee was it....  
That ever swich a chaunce sholde falle;  
For gentil men they were, of greet estat,  
And no-thing but for love was this debat.

Their pleading softened the Duke's mood,

For pitee renneth sone in gentil herte,

and remembering that years before he had felt "loves peyne" himself, he finally forgave them their trespass wholly. Cool, sensible advice he then offered, that since only one could wed the desired lady, the fortunate man should be determined by a tournament for which each lover should bring a hundred knights armed for the lists ready to contend for her in battle. With joy and hope the youths departed to make their preparations.

And what of Emily? She, too, made preparation, which she hoped might affect the outcome of the contest. As the time approached, she sought the help of Diana. She rose one morning with the sun, and accompanied by her maidens carrying fire and



her. Here Emily first heard of the cousin's passion for her from the lips of Palamon who addressed the Duke thus:

'This is Arctite,  
That the thy hand is banded on his head,  
For which he hath deserved to be dead.  
For this is he that came up to the gate,  
And says, that he mighte Philostrate.  
Thou hast no Japet there but carry a year.  
And thou hast marked him thy chief enemy....  
... I am thine worthy Palamon,  
That hath thy prison broken wickedly.  
I am thy mortal foe, and it is I  
That loveth so sore Emily the Briton  
That I wol die present in his sight.'

When the brave Duke, thereupon, summarily pronounced judgment of death, Emily and the other ladies fell upon their knees and begged for mercy, for thought they,

Gret pitye was it....  
That ever such a shamee should falle;  
For gentle men they were, of greet estat,  
And no-thing but for love was this debat.

Their pleading softened the Duke's mood.

For pitye remetht some in gentle herte,

and remembering that years before he had felt "loves pynne" himself, he finally forgave them their trespass wholly. Good, sensible advice he then offered, that since only one could wed the desired lady, the fortunate man should be determined by a tournament for which each lover should bring a hundred knights armed for the lists ready to contend for her in battle. With joy and hope the youths departed to make their preparations.

And what of Emily? She, too, made preparation, which she hoped might affect the outcome of the contest. As the time approached, she sought the help of Diana. She rose one morning with the sun, and accompanied by her maidens carrying fire and



incense for the sacrifice, hurried to the goddess' temple.

There, wearing a crown of fresh oak leaves, she prayed with sad countenance:

'Chaste goddess, wel wostow that I  
Desire to been a mayden al my lyf,  
Ne never wol I be no love ne wyf.  
I am, thou woost, yet of thy compagne,  
A mayde, and love hunting vemerye,  
And for to walken in the wodes wilde.

.....  
This grace I preye thee with-oute more,  
As sende love and pees betwixe hem two.  
And fro me turne away hir hertes so,  
That al hir bisy torment, and hir fyr  
Be queynt, or turned in another place;  
And if so be thou wolt not do me grace,  
Or if my destinee be shapen so,  
That I shal nedes have oon of hem two,  
As sende me him that most desireth me.'

Emily had not reciprocated the sentiment of the two youths by falling in love at first sight, and only one sight had been granted her. The prospect of leaving her happy life and entering upon the uncertainties of marriage distressed her. To her, as to Constance, the contemplation of marriage to a stranger was not pleasant. Alas, for her hope. It was decreed "among the goddes hye" that she should be wedded.

Emily in the royal party witnessed the tourney and, at its close, cast a friendly eye on the victorious Arcite riding down the long field toward her. She saw his downfall and followed him to the castle, where, with his last breath, since he could not have her himself, he declared to her:

'ne knowe I non  
So worthy to ben loved as Palamon....  
And if that ever you shul been a wyf,  
Foryet not Palamon, the gentil man.'

Emily duly mourned Arcite's death and wept both evening and



incense for the sacrifice, hurried to the goddess' temple.  
There, wearing a crown of fresh oak leaves, she prayed with sad countenance:

'O haste goddess, well wotest thou that I  
Desire to be a maiden at my life,  
No never will I be no love no wife.  
I am, thou wotest, yet of thy company,  
A maiden, and love hunting-verge,  
And for to walk in the woods wide.  
.....  
This grace I pray thee with-oute more,  
As sende love and peace betwixt us two,  
And fro me turne away his hertes so,  
That at his play torment, and his tyr  
Be quiet, or turned in another place;  
And if so he knowe not to be grace,  
Or if my destiny be shapen so,  
That I shal never have con of him two,  
As sende me him that most desireth me.'

Emily had not reciprocated the sentiment of the two youths by falling in love at first sight, and only one night had been granted her. The prospect of leaving her happy life and entering upon the uncertainties of marriage distressed her. To her, as to Constance, the contemplation of marriage to a stranger was not pleasant. Alas, for her hope. It was decreed "among the goddesses" that she should be wedded.

Emily in the royal party witnessed the journey and, at its close, cast a friendly eye on the victorious Arctur riding down the long field toward her. She saw his downfall and followed him to the castle, where, with his last breath, since he could not have her himself, he declared to her:

'No knows I now  
So worthy to be loved as Isamen....  
And if that ever you shal be a wife,  
Forget not Isamen, the gentle man.'

Emily duly mourned Arctur's death and wept both evening and



morning and applied the torch, according to custom, to the funeral pyre. In due time, however, Duke Theseus summoned Palamon and Emily and said to the latter:

'Suster....this is my fulle assent  
 With al th'avys heer of my parlement,  
 That gentil Palamon, your owne knight,  
 That serveth yow with wille, herte and might,  
 And ever hath doon, sin that ye first him knewe,  
 That ye shul of your grace, upon him rewe,  
 And taken him for housbonde and for lord.'

The company voted the Knight's tale a noble story worth remembering.

Emily is the conventional fair young maiden, fond of out-of-door life, shrinking from alliance with a stranger, unready for the exacting duties of married life, but yielding, nevertheless, to the inevitable. "Chaucer is one of the few who has ever portrayed that fierce shrinking from the thought of matrimony" experienced by Emily, which is as natural as the Wife's licentiousness.<sup>2</sup> Her physical beauty evokes the love of Palamon and Arcite; her character they do not know. Emily, "has necessarily no individuality, not so much because of her youth, but because she is merely the prize for which the two noble kinsmen contend."<sup>1</sup> She is, "within her limits, as beautiful and touching a figure as any in poetry; but her limits are those of a figure in a stained-glass window compared with a portrait of Titian's".<sup>3</sup> Although the Poet pictures Emily as convention prescribed, he follows her sympathetically through the tale.

1. Manly, Canterbury tales, p. 540.

2. Hadow, Chaucer and his times, p. 128.

3. Coulton, Chaucer and his England, p. 222.



morning and applied the torch, according to custom, to the funeral pyre. In due time, however, Duke Theobald summoned Palamides and Emily and said to the latter:

'Butter... this is my little assent  
With all my heart of my parliament.  
That gentle Palamides, your own knight,  
That serves you with wife, child and night,  
And ever hath been, and that he first knew,  
That ye shall of your grace, upon his knee,  
And taken him for husband and for lord.'

The company voted the knight's tale a noble story worth remembrance.

Emily is the conventional fair young maiden, fond of out-of-door life, shrinking from alliance with a stranger, unworthy for the exacting duties of married life, but yielding, nevertheless, to the inevitable. "Chaucer is one of the few who has ever portrayed that fierce shrinking from the thought of matrimony" experienced by Emily, which is as natural as the wife's licentiousness.<sup>2</sup> Her physical beauty evokes the love of Palamides and Arctur; her character they do not know. Emily, "has necessarily no individuality, not so much because of her youth, but because she is merely the prize for which the two noble kinsmen contend."<sup>1</sup> She is, "within her limits, as beautiful and touching a figure as any in poetry; but her limits are those of a figure in a stained-glass-window compared with a portrait of Titian's."<sup>3</sup> Although the poet pictures Emily as conventional prescribed, he follows her sympathetically through the tale.

1. Manly, *Chaucer's tales*, p. 340.
2. Hadow, *Chaucer and his times*, p. 128.
3. Golliton, *Chaucer and his England*, p. 222.



### Constance

Constance, daughter of the Emperor of Rome, was famed throughout the city for her goodness, humility and beauty. It was said that she was without vanity, crudeness or folly, that she was a mirror of courtesy, her heart a very shrine of holiness, her hand a liberal minister of almsgiving. The common voice of every man truthfully proclaimed her unsurpassed, considering goodness as well as beauty, since the world began. Certain merchants from Syria, sojourning in the city, heard about her, and were so impressed by her excellent renown, that when they reported to their inquisitive soldan the tidings of sundry realms which they had seen, among other wonders they told him about Constance. Her great worth caught the imagination of the soldan, who became so enamored with her reputation that he found great pleasure in having her in mind, and all his desire and busy care was to love her while his life should last. One day he sent for his privy council and declared to them that unless he might have grace to win Constance within a little space, he was no better than dead, and charged them to shape some remedy for his life in haste. Thereupon, after subtle reasoning, to overcome the difficulties, it was decided that no less than chivalry, the state and the church would be required to bring about the marriage of the soldan of Syria with the daughter of the Roman emperor.

Alas for the fair maiden whose renown had been heard so far

## Constance

Constance, daughter of the Emperor of Rome, was famed throughout the city for her goodness, beauty and beauty. It was said that she was without vanity, crudeness or folly, that she was a mirror of courtesy, her heart a very shrine of holiness, her hand a liberal minister of almsgiving. The common voice of every man truthfully proclaimed her unexpressed, considering goodness as well as beauty, since the world began. Certain merchants from Syria, sojourning in the city, heard about her, and were so impressed by her excellent renown, that when they reported to their lucrative soldiers the tidings of such a lady, which they had seen, among other wonders they told him about Constance. Her great worth caught the imagination of the soldier, who became so enamored with her reputation that he found great pleasure in having her in mind, and all his desire and busy care was to have her while his life should last. One day he sent for his privy council and declared to them that unless he might have grace to win Constance within a little space he was no better than dead, and charged them to shape some remedy for his life in haste. Thereupon, after subtle reasoning, to overcome the difficulties, it was decided that no less than chivalry, the state and the church would be required to bring about the marriage of the soldier of Syria with the daughter of the Roman emperor.

Alas for the lady maiden whose renown had been heard so far



away. The woeful, fatal day came when Constance was to be sent to a strange nation,

in destruccion of Maumetrye  
And in encrees of Cristes lawe dere.

Pale and sorrowful, she wept that she must leave her home and friends and become subject to an unknown husband. Yet, she obediently bade her parents farewell, praying for grace to fulfil divine purpose whatever the consequences to herself. When, her romance cut short, she was placed at the old soldaness's command on board a rudderless ship and bidden to,

lerne sayle  
Out of Surrye agaynward to Itayle,

her religious faith responded to her fear. She prayed for eternal life with no word of hatred or revenge toward the cause of her sorrow. Through days and years of terrifying experiences, she kept her faith, and when Providence restored her to land and human companionship, she continued a blameless life. She was so diligent and eager to please and serve everyone, that all loved her who looked on her face. She endured unjust blame patiently, and by her beautiful example led others to the Christian life.

King Alla soon wedded this bright maiden and made her queen; in his absence his jealous mother ordered the innocent queen and her small baby to be put upon the same ship in which she had come and pushed from the land. Although again banished without apparent reason, with her innocent child consigned for a second time to the merciless ocean, her faith and obedience never faltered. She centered her anxiety on her child, her own chastity,



away. The woe, fatal day came when Constance was to be sent to a strange nation.

In destruction of humanity  
And in errors of Christian law here.

Fate and sorrowful, she wept that she must leave her home and friends and become subject to an unknown husband. Yet, she obediently bade her parents farewell, praying for grace to fulfill divine purpose whatever the consequences to herself. When, her romance cut short, she was placed at the old soldier's command on board a rubberless ship and bidden to.

Learn ways  
Cut of Europe awayward to India.

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and the will of God. As she approached the ship with her baby to begin a blind voyage at the cruel, unreasonable command, she presented a vivid, dignified, beautiful picture. Her character had reached its climax. The reader pities but also admires.

With a deadly pale face she went her way to the ship; with good intent she took the will of Christ and kneeling on the shore said, "Lord, ay wel-com be thy sonde". Turning to her friends she continued,

'He that me kepte from the false blame  
 Why I was on the londe amonges yow,  
 He can me kepe from harme and eek fro shame  
 In salte see, al-though I see nat how.  
 In him triste I and in his moder dere,  
 That is to me my seyl and eek my stere.'

Her little child lay weeping upon her arm, and kneeling, she said pityingly to him, "Pees, litel sone, I wol do thee non harm". And then she drew her kerchief from her head and laid it over his little eyes and lulled him in her arms. Then she cast her eyes to heaven:

'Moder', quod she, 'and mayde bright, Marye,  
 .....  
 Thou sawe thy child y-slain bifor thyn yen,  
 And yet now liveth my litel child....  
 Rewe on my child.'

She thought of his welfare:

'O litel child, allas. what is thy gilt,  
 That never wroughtest sinne as yet....  
 Why wil thyn harde fader han thee spilt?'

Then she appealed to the constable to keep the boy and bring him up in safety, or, if he dare do no more, at least to kiss him once in his father's name. Then looking back toward the land, she said, "Farewell, ruthless husband", and arose and



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good intent she took the will of Christ and kneeling on the  
shore said, "Lord, my well-com be thy sonde". Turning to her  
friends she continued,

'He that me kepte from the false blame  
Why I was on the longe wayes gone,  
He can me kepe from harme and eke the shame  
In wylde see, al-though I see not how.  
In him I truste I and in his moder dere,  
That is to me my sayl and eke my stowe.'

Her little child lay weeping upon her arm, and kneeling, she  
said pitifully to him, "Deere, litle sonne, I wol do thee non  
harm". And then she drew her kerchief from her head and laid  
it over his little eyes and lulled him in her arms. Then she  
cast her eyes to heaven:

'Mother', quod she, 'and mayde bright, Marye,  
.....  
Thou sawe thy child y-slain biforn thy yere,  
And yet now liveth my litle child.....  
Hewe on my child.'

She thought of his welfare:

'O litle child, alas, what is thy kille,  
That never wroughtest sinne as yet.....  
Why wilt thou hurte father han thee spylle?'

Then she appealed to the constable to keep the boy and bring  
him up in safety, or, if he dare do no more, at least to kiss  
him once in his father's name. Then looking back toward the  
land, she said, "Barnewell, ruthless husband", and arose and



walked down the shore toward the ship, and ever she soothed her weeping child, and she took her leave, crossed herself with a holy purpose and into the ship she went. The God of her faith, "as strong as ever he was",

Hath shapen, thurgh hir endelees goodnesse  
To make an ende of al hir hevinesse.

Returned at last to her father's home, she praised God a hundred thousand times, and ended her life "in vertu and in holy almesdede". "Holy" was the adjective used by the Man of Law to describe his heroine as he closed the tale.

Constance herself overshadows the events of the story. She demonstrates perfection of character under the diverse circumstances of fear and sorrow. To her, life's hard experiences had all come by the will of God, and she accepted them and adjusted herself to them in the spirit of Christian meekness. So nearly perfect at the beginning, her character develops not so much through struggle against temptation or doubt, as through constant practice of meekness and trust. "The great Christian virtues of humility, faith, hope, charity, sum up the whole of her nature; by these stars she steers her rudderless boat as she sails in the salt sea; by these she lives in the court of emperor and king."<sup>1</sup> Yet, perfect as she is, she is a real personality, not an individual, but a type. Chaucer achieves a great artistic triumph when he depicts her nature in such a way as "to make us feel the force of her personality, and love her and sympathize with her". He knew the tale would please the

1. Root, Poetry of Chaucer, p. 185.

walked down the shore toward the ship, and ever she soothed her  
weeping child, and she took her leave, crossed herself with a  
holy purpose and into the ship she went. The God of her faith  
"as strong as ever he was".

With shaggy, shaggy hair and shaggy  
to make an end of his hairiness.

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and sympathize with her". He knew the tale would please the



readers of his day, who loved "the perfect, the universal".<sup>1</sup>

The Host pronounced the story a profitable one for the occasion.

Virginia was the fourteen-year old daughter of a knight named Virginia. "The maid was fair and of excellent beauty above every sight", a masterpiece of nature, far more beautiful than anything human artists can create. She had a beautiful form and complexion with hair which shone

like gold.

And she was a thousandfold more virtuous than beautiful. No

desirable quality was lacking from her character. She was modest in body and in spirit, modest, temperate in bearing and adornment, self-controlled, patient and

ever in business

she drove him out of her sight.

"If we have not in Chaucer a housewife painted with loving, domestic touches, we have a maiden, painted in such colors, that all she wanted was a husband to make her such a housewife."<sup>1</sup> Although she could be eloquent, she put no words but spoke plainly and all her words were in agreement with virtue and good breeding. People and horses both were attracted to her; indeed, she sometimes feigned sickness in order to escape them. In short, she was a model for other girls to imitate.

True to her character, when danger to her virtue threatened

1. Root, Poetry of Chaucer, p. 187.

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The Host pronounced the story a profitable one for the occasion.



### Virginia

Virginia was the fourteen-year old daughter of a knight named Virginius. "The maid was fair and of excellent beauty above every wight", a masterpiece of nature, far more beautiful than anything human artists can create. She had a beautiful form and complexion with hair which Phoebus

died hath....

Lied to the stremes of his burned hete.

And she was a thousandfold more virtuous than beautiful. No desirable quality was lacking from her character. She was chaste in body and in spirit, modest, temperate in bearing and adornment, self-controlled, patient and

ever in businessse

To drive hir out of ydel slogardye.

"If....we have not in Chaucer a house-wife painted with loving, domestic touches, we have a maiden, painted in such colors, that all she wanted was a husband to make her such a house-wife."<sup>1</sup> Although she could be eloquent, she put on no airs, but spoke plainly and all her words were in agreement with virtue and good breeding. Revels and dances held no attraction for her; indeed, she sometimes feigned sickness in order to escape them. In short, she was a model for other girls to imitate.

True to her character, when danger to her virtue threat-

1. Browne, Chaucer's England, p. 177.

## Virginia

Virginia was the fourteen-year old daughter of a knight named Virginia. "The maid was fair and of excellent beauty above every wight", a masterpiece of nature, far more beautiful than anything human artists can create. She had a beautiful form and complexion with hair which shone

dyed hair....  
Lyn to the stream of his burned hair.

And she was a thousandfold more virtuous than beautiful. No desirable quality was lacking from her character. She was chaste in body and in spirit, modest, temperate in bearing and adornment, self-controlled, patient and

ever in distress  
to drive her out of the labyrinth.

"If....we have not in Chaucer a house-wife painted with loving domestic touches, we have a maiden, painted in such colors, that all she wanted was a husband to make her such a house-wife." Although she could be eloquent, she put on no airs, but spoke plainly and all her words were in agreement with virtue and good breeding. Revels and dances held no attraction for her; indeed, she sometimes feigned sickness in order to escape them. In short, she was a model for other girls to imitate.

True to her character, when danger to her virtue threat-



ened, she chose death rather than a life of evil. In this she was her father's own daughter. When Virginius heard the verdict of the false judge concerning Virginia, he went home and called his daughter.

'O dere doghter, ender of my lyf,  
Which I have fostred up with swich plesaunce,  
That thou were never out of my remembraunce.  
O doghter which that art my laste wo,  
And in my lyf my laste joye also,  
O gemme of chastitee, in pacience  
Take thou thy deeth, for this is my sentence,  
For love and nat for hate, thou most be deed.'

The maiden exclaimed

'O mercy, dere fader',....  
And with that word she both hir armes layde  
About his nekke, as she was wont to do:  
The teres broste out of hir eyen two,  
And seyde, 'gode fader, shal I dye?  
Is ther no grace, is ther no remedye?'

Then she begged for a little time to lament her death, like Jephthah's daughter. And then she swooned. Afterward, she rose and said

'Blessed be god, that I shal dye a mayde.  
Yif me my deeth, er that I have a shame;  
Doth with your child your wil.'  
And with that word she preyed him ful ofte,  
That with his swerd he wolde smyte softe.

Thus she yielded up her life.

The judge was right when he deemed that she was strong in friends. Her fame had spread on every side, both with respect to beauty and goodness. In her life could be read as in a book every good word or deed that belong to a virtuous maiden. Throughout the land, everyone who loved virtue praised her. "Her beauty was her death", exclaimed the Host. "Alas, she paid too dearly for it. Truly, this is a piteous tale to hear."

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was her father's own daughter. When Virginia heard the verdict  
of the false judge concerning Virginia, he went home and called  
his daughter.

'O dear daughter, sister of my life,  
Which I have feared up with such assistance,  
That thou were never out of my remembrance.  
O daughter which art my last joy,  
And in my life my last joy also,  
O game of chance, in passion  
Take thou thy death, for this is my sentence,  
For love and not for hate, thou must be dead.'

The maiden exclaimed

'O mercy, dear father,.....  
And with that word she both his eyes layde  
About his necke, as she was wont to do:  
The tears broke out of his eyes too,  
And sayde, 'good father, shall I dye?  
Is there no grace, is there no remedy?'

Then she begged for a little time to lament her death, like  
Joseph's daughter. And then she swooned. Afterward, she rose  
and said

'Blessed be god, that I shall dye a martyr.  
Yit me my death, or that I have a shame;  
Both with your child your will.  
And with that word she pressed his full life,  
That with his sword he would smyte softer.

Thus she yielded up her life.

The judge was right when he deemed that she was strong in  
friends. Her fame had spread on every side, both with respect  
to beauty and goodness. In her life could be read as in a book  
every good word or deed that belong to a virtuous maiden.  
Throughout the land, everyone who loved virtue praised her.  
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### Griselda

In Griselda Chaucer personifies the virtue of patient self-denial. He deletes all inconsistencies and contradictions from her temperament in favor of the one dominating quality. No hard experience can change the set and trend of her mind. The portrait is too perfect to be human. In fact, the Clerk explains that his heroine is not intended as a pattern for wives to follow literally, but, rather, as an ideal for the spirit of mortals in their acceptance of adversity. This allegorical touch does not prevent the reader's enjoyment of the woman's picture.

Griselda's utter self-abnegation and submissiveness to the will of her husband was a virtue in medieval eyes. The feudal system posited the lord's supremacy. His will was law to his family and servants. He held the power of life and death over his dependents. He must be obeyed unquestioningly however selfish, erratic, unjust, inhuman his whims might be. Therefore, Griselda's attitude was looked upon favorably by the majority of the Clerk's listeners. From their point of view, her character was altogether admirable.

Griselda's life was hard from the first. Her home was a humble cottage in the meanest part of the village; her father was the poorest of the inhabitants. No love of luxury filled her heart; she drank oftener of the well than of the tun; she was acquainted with work but not with idle ease. She was



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obedient to her father, kept his house and cared for him with great respect and love. Though but a young girl, she had a mature and grave outlook.

Quite unconsciously she attracted the attention of the marquis who observed her as he passed her home on his frequent hunting trips. He saw her spinning while she watched the few sheep, or gathered greens and vegetables for dinner, or worked around the cottage. He noticed how pretty she looked despite her poor clothes. He knew of her care for her father. He could read industry, frugality and virtue in her bearing. He so approved her goodness and womanliness, unusual in a girl so young, that he decided if he should ever wed, Griselda would be the maiden of his choice.

A good judge the marquis proved. Griselda's filial reverence and dutiful care were a prediction of her wifely obedience; her industry and virtue would characterize the woman into whom the girl was to grow. Her resourcefulness under favorable circumstances would develop into versatility.

As she watched for the wedding procession to see the marquis and his unknown bride, behold, the lord stopped at her door and announced his desire to marry her. A medieval proposal it was. Though the marquis's admiration must have been accompanied by love in some degree, he made no mention of it. He assured her father that he wished to take her for his wife, and he exacted a promise from Griselda but made none himself.

'I seye this, be ye redy with good herte  
To al my lust, and that I frely may,  
As me best thinketh, do ye laugh or smerte,



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As she watched for the wedding procession to see the marquis  
and his unknown bride, behold, the lord stopped at her door and  
announced his desire to marry her. A needless proposal it was.  
Though the marquis's admiration must have been accompanied by  
love in some degree, he made no mention of it. He assured her  
father that he wished to take her for his wife, and he exacted  
a promise from Griselda but made none himself.

'I say this, be ye ready with good hearts  
to all my first, and that I freely may,  
As ye best thinketh, do ye laugh or weep.'



And never ye to grucche it, night ne day?  
 And eek whan I sey "ye," ne sey nat "nay,"  
 Neither by word ne frowning contenance;  
 Swer this, and here I swere our alliance.'

And Griselda, "wondring upon this word, quaking for drede",  
 answered,

'lord, undigne and unworthy  
 Am I to thilke honour that ye me bede;  
 But as ye wol your-self, right so wol I.  
 And heer I swere that never willingly  
 In werk ne thoght I nil yow disobeye,  
 For to be deed, though me were looth to deye.'

"This is y-nogh, Grisilde myn," quod he, and preceding her out  
 of the house, he introduced her to his assembled subjects.

At this point Griselda entered a new world. From extreme  
 poverty she stepped to wealth; from the obscurity of an unknown  
 maiden to the prominence of the first lady of the land. Nothing  
 she possessed in her father's cottage was good enough to enter  
 the palace. She was arrayed in a beautiful wedding dress, fur-  
 nished by her future husband, and adorned with gold brooches  
 and rings set with gems, her hair arranged becomingly. Scarce-  
 ly did the people know her for her fairness when thus trans-  
 formed; she was taken to her new home on a snow-white horse and  
 conducted to her wedding feast. Such an unselfish and steady  
 character as hers would stand the shock of sudden riches. With  
 all the change in outward looks, the honest heart of Griselda  
 remained unaltered.

She adapted herself so easily to the new life that it  
 seemed as if she had never known the plain, humble cottage, but  
 had been reared in an emperor's palace. She blossomed out in  
 the favorable atmosphere and adorned her new home and her



And never ye to grudge it, might ye say?  
And ask when I say "ye," no say nae "nay."  
Neither by word ne throwing contumace;  
Swer this, and here I swear our alliance.

And Griselda, "wondering upon this word, praying for deeds",

answered,

'Lord, and give and answer  
Am I to think honour that ye me bid;  
But as ye wol your-self, right so wol I.  
And here I swear that never willingly  
In work ne thought I will you disobey,  
Nor to be deed, though me were loath to daye.'

"This is y-nough, Griselda myn," quod he, and presenting her out

of the house, he introduced her to his assembled subjects.

At this point Griselda entered a new world. From extreme

poverty she stepped to wealth; from the obscurity of an unknown

maiden to the prominence of the first lady of the land. Nothing

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eminent position. She took an interest in the welfare of her subjects;

Ther nas discord, rancour ne hevinesse  
In al that lond, that she ne coude apese,  
And wysly bringe hem alle in reste and ese.

In the marquis's absence she could manage the affairs of state. She used such wise judgment that popular opinion declared she had been sent from heaven to save the people and mend their wrongs.

Griselda's great trials and sorrows were the result of the marquis's unreasonable desire to prove her devotion. He announced that she was to give up her baby because the people objected to serving a ruler of such lowly birth; for their sakes the child must be removed. When she had heard this startling and heartbreaking dictum, Griselda was still unchanged in word, look and manner; apparently she was not grieved. Even when the evil-looking sergeant seized the baby as if he meant to kill her before the mother's face, she gave no sign of any feeling but acquiescence in the marquis's desire. She held the baby in her lap a few minutes and began to kiss and lull her, and made the sign of the cross over her. Committing the child's soul to the Father, "that for us deyde up-on a croys of tree", she handed the baby to the sergeant. "Goth now", quoth she, "and dooth my lordes heste"; but she asked that unless the lord had forbidden it, the man would bury the body where no birds or beasts could reach it to tear it to pieces. The marquis watched to see if her attitude was changed by this experience, but no indication of it could he find by any stretch of the imagination.



eminent position. She took an interest in the welfare of her

subjects;

After her death, however, no business  
in all that time, that she no longer  
And surely bring her life in peace and ease.

In the morning's absence she could manage the affairs of state.

She used such wise judgment that popular opinion declared she

had been sent from heaven to save the people and mend their

ways.

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lap a few minutes and began to kiss and lull her, and made the

sign of the cross over her. Committing the child's soul to the

father, "that for us be on a cross of trees," she handed

the baby to the sergeant. "God now," cried she, "and do with my

lord's behest"; but she asked that unless the lord had forbidden

it, she would bury the body where no birds or beasts could

reach it to tear it to pieces. The marquis watched to see if

her attitude was changed by this experience, but no indication

of it could be found by any stretch of the imagination.



Even this submission and devotion to his will could not satisfy the lord, but he imposed upon the longsuffering Griselda a second experience of the same kind. Reminding her of all the benefits for which she was indebted to him, and pretending the people's murmuring at the prospect of being ruled by the grandchild of the poorest citizen, he ordered her to give up her two-year-old boy. Her reply was:

'Ye been our lord, doth with your owene thing  
Right as yow list....

.....  
And certes, if I hadde prescience  
Your wil to knowe er ye your lust me tolde,  
I wolde it doon with-uten necligence

.....  
For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,  
Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plesse.'

When the marquis saw her constancy, he cast down his eyes and wondered how she could suffer with such patience.

For which it semed thus, that of hem two  
Ther nas but o wil; for as Walter leste,  
The same lust was hir plesaunce also.

Nevertheless, still other trials and insults the insatiable marquis devised for the pain of his loyal wife. Using the people's wish, again, as an excuse, he announced that he was to put her aside and take another wife, and that his young bride was at that moment approaching. He was met by the same acquiescence and obedience; Griselda returned to her father's house. Presently, he summoned her again; no one knew so well how to arrange the palace according to his likes, and she must manage the preparations for the new bride. Willingly she gave her best service to please her sovereign. And when the girl was introduced, he asked Griselda,



Even this submission and devotion to his will could not satisfy the lord, but he imposed upon the long-suffering Griselda as a second experience of the same kind. Reminding her of all the benefits for which she was indebted to him, and pretending the people's murmuring at the prospect of being ruled by the grandchild of the poorest peasant, he ordered her to give up her two-year-old boy. Her reply was:

'Ye been our lord, doth with your owne thing  
Right as you list.....  
And certes, if I hadde prescience  
Your wil to knowe as ye your first me tolde,  
I wolde it doon with-outen negligence  
For wiste I that ye deeth wolde do you see,  
Right gladly wolde I gyve, you so please.'

When the marquis saw her constancy, he cast down his eyes and wondered how she could suffer with such patience.

'For which it seemed thus, that of her two  
There was but a will; for as Walter leste,  
The name that was his pleasure also.'

Nevertheless, still other trials and torments the insatiable marquis devised for the pain of his loyal wife. Using the people's wish, again, as an excuse, he announced that he was to put her aside and take another wife, and that his young bride was at that moment approaching. He was met by the same acquiescence and obedience; Griselda returned to her father's house. Presently, he summoned her again; so one knew so well how to arrange the palace according to his likes, and she must manage the preparations for the new bride. Willingly she gave her best advice to please her sovereign. And when the girl was introduced, he asked Griselda,



'How lyketh thee my wyf and hir beautee?'  
 'Right wel', quod she, 'my lord; for, in good fey,  
 A fairer say I never noon than she.  
 I prey to god yeve hir prosperitee'.

One bit of advice she humbly advanced, that he should treat the new wife more gently, for she had been reared tenderly and could not endure hardship. At last the marquis was satisfied, and acknowledged:

'This is y-nogh, Griselda myn',...  
 'Be now na-more agast ne yvel apayed;  
 I have thy feith and thy benignitee,  
 As wel as ever womman was, assayed,  
 In greet estaat, and povreliche arrayed.  
 Now knowe I, dere wyf, thy stedfastnesse,'--  
 And hir in armes took and gan hir kesse.

He restored Griselda to her rightful place and gave her the two children. She was again arrayed in beautiful garments and crowned.

Griselda summed up her philosophy concerning herself and her children when she said to the marquis,

'Ye been our lord, doth with your owene thing  
 Right as yow list.'

Was she weak and immoral thus to sacrifice her own rights and her children's lives? What was her reason for subordinating everything to her husband's will? Three factors are noteworthy. She was the marquis's subject before she was his wife and was obliged to obey. Secondly, she failed to appreciate her own worth; she could never forget her humble origin and her indebtedness to her lord. "In her own eyes, Griselda is always first and foremost, not a wife, but a serf."<sup>1</sup> Chiefly, however, she

1. Hinckley, Debate on marriage, p. 298.





was impelled by honor. Before marriage she had deliberately promised the marquis that his will should be her will; that never willingly would she disobey in deed or thought even up to the point of death. Thus, she had pledged her fidelity and she possessed strength of character to keep the promise. An impression that she was artificial, impossible or immoral is due to the failure of the modern reader to comprehend what the medieval standard demanded of the perfect woman. To her contemporaries, Griselda was but doing her duty.

Though her husband held first place, well he knew, states the Clerk, that next to himself she loved her children best in every way. Her treatment of them was wholly tender and motherly.

And in her barm this litel child she leyde  
 With ful sad face, and gan the child to kisse  
 And lulled it, and after gan it blisse.  
 And thus she seyde in hir benigne voys,  
 'Far weel, my child; I shal thee never see;  
 But sith I thee have marked with the croys,  
 Of thilke fader blessed mote thou be,  
 That for us deyde up-on a croys of tree.  
 Thy soule, litel child, I him bitake,  
 For this night shaltow dyen for my sake.'

The suppressed grief at loss of them is matched only by her radiant ecstasy when she received them back to her arms.

She bothe hir yonge children un-to hir calleth,  
 And in hir armes, pitously wepinge,  
 Embraceth hem, and tendrely kysinge  
 Ful lik a mooder, with hir salte teres  
 She batheth bothe hir visage and hir heres.

The twelve intervening years of unspoken sorrow can be imagined if not described.

To Chaucer's earliest readers, the story was most pathetic,

1. *Chaucer, Poetry of Chaucer, p. 260.*

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eval standard demanded of the perfect woman. To her contem-  
poraries, Griselda was not doing her duty.

Though her husband held first place, well he knew, states  
the Clerk, that next to himself she loved her children best in  
every way. Her treatment of them was wholly tender and mother-

ly.

And in her barn this little child she layde  
With fat and lase, and gan the child to kisse  
And lulled it, and after gan it blisse.  
And thus she sayde in hir benigne voyce,  
'Far weel, my child; I shall thee never see;  
But with I thee have marked with the croys,  
Of thine father blessed more thou be,  
That for us deyde up-on a croys of trece.  
My soules, little child, I thus blisse,  
For this night shalwe open for my sake.'

The supressed grief at loss of them is watched only by her  
radiant ecstasy when she received them back to her arms.

She bathed his young children un-to his callist,  
And in his arms, pitously wept,  
Embracest him, and tenderly kist  
Til lik a mother, with his salue lase,  
She bathed bothe his visage and his hares.

The twelve intervening years of unspoken sorrow can be imagined  
if not described.

To Chaucer's earliest readers, the story was most pathetic.



and Ten Brink calls it "the song of songs of true and tender womanhood".<sup>1</sup> To what extent Chaucer approved of Griselda is a question. Possibly he considered her a desirable but unattainable ideal for women to imitate. However he may have liked to contemplate such a paragon, it seems probable that he would have thought it absurd for anyone to copy Griselda in actual life; it would have been "importable" for her and detrimental to the characters of all concerned, in Chaucer's day as in ours. He chose the tale to please his readers and stated as its moral that everyone ought, according to his ability, to be steadfast in adversity.

against her will nor display any jealousy.

but his obeys, and folow his wil in al  
 is any lovere to his lady shal  
 save that the name of overgretice,  
 that wold he have for shame of his degrees.

By keeping their vows, Arveragus and Dorigen became the ideal husband and wife of the Canterbury Tales.

Dorigen was bound up in her husband and could not be happy without him. In his absence she wept and sighed, she worried and fasted and lamented, desire for his presence so possessed her that she set all this wide world at naught. She would not be diverted by the friends who suggested all kinds of amusements, for everything reminded her of Arveragus. The sight of ships at sea made her wish for one that would bring him home. The grisly rocks upon the shore, suggestive of shipwrecks, led her to pray for her husband's safety. The danger seemed her to come because Arveragus was not among the doctors. And when

1. Root, Poetry of Chaucer, p. 260.

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1. Root, Poetry of Chaucer, p. 250.



### Dorigen

One of the fairest ladies under the sun was loved by a knight who wrought "many a labour, many a greet emprise" in order to win her. He thought her so far above him that he could hardly bring himself to reveal his feelings. But his "worthinesse" and his "meek obeysaunce" won her heart so that she agreed "to take him for hir housbonde and hir lord" and to be his "humble trewe wyf". Arveragus, in his turn swore to her as a knight that he would never assume any mastery over her against her will nor display any jealousy,

but hir obeye, and folwe hir wil in al  
As any lovere to his lady shal  
Save that the name of soverayntee,  
That wolde he have for shame of his degree.

By keeping their vows, Arveragus and Dorigen became the ideal husband and wife of the Canterbury Tales.

Dorigen was bound up in her husband and could not be happy without him. In his absence she wept and sighed, she mourned and fasted and lamented; desire for his presence so possessed her that she set all this wide world at naught. She would not be diverted by the friends who suggested all kinds of amusements, for everything reminded her of Arveragus. The sight of ships at sea made her wish for one that would bring him home. The grisly rocks upon the shore, suggestive of shipwreck, led her to pray for her husband's safety. The dance caused her to moan because Arveragus was not among the dancers. And when

## Dorisen

One of the fairest ladies under the sun was loved by a knight who wrought "many a labour, many a great exploit" in order to win her. He thought her so far above him that he could hardly bring himself to reveal his feelings. But his "worthiness" and his "meek obedience" won her heart so that she agreed "to take him for his horse and his lord" and to be his "bride and true wife". Arveragus, in his turn swore to her as a knight that he would never assume any mastery over her against her will nor display any jealousy.

But his oaths, and false his will in all  
As any lover to his lady shall  
Save that the name of sovereignty,  
That would he have for shame of his degree.

By keeping their vows, Arveragus and Dorisen became the ideal

husband and wife of the Unfeigned Tales.

Dorisen was bound up in her husband and could not be happy without him. In his absence she wept and sighed, she mourned and fasted and lamented; desire for his presence so possessed her that she set all this wide world at naught. She would not be diverted by the friends who suggested all kinds of amusements, for everything reminded her of Arveragus. The sight of ships at sea made her wish for one that would bring him home. The grimy rocks upon the shore, suggestive of shipwreck, led her to pray for her husband's safety. The dance caused her to weep because Arveragus was not among the dancers. And when



Arveragus, "the worthy man of arms, the flower of chivalry,"<sup>1</sup> returned home the heart of Dorigen was filled with bliss.

Faithful to her husband, she spurned the advances of a lusty young squire, servant to Venus, who, during Arveragus's absence asked for her love.

'Ne shal I never been untrewe wyf  
In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;  
I wol ben his to whom that I am knit;  
Take this for fynal answer as of me.'

But then, in a spirit of playfulness, she promised to love him best of any man if he would remove all the rocks from the Brittany coast, so that not a stone could be seen. And she added,

'For wel I woot that it shal never bityde.  
Let swiche folies out of your herte slyde.'

Little did she suspect the power of magic which was to make an "appareance" that all the rocks "weren y-voyded everichon".

After a time, Aurelius returned to announce that he had fulfilled the conditions, and the "rokkes been aweye". She never supposed she would come into such a trap. With pale and sad countenance, she wept and complained. Memory brought to mind numberless women and girls who in former times had sacrificed their lives for honor, and she decided,

'woot I no socour  
Save only deeth or elles dishonour;  
Oon of these two bihoveth me to chese.  
But natheless, yet have I lever lese  
My lyf than of my body have a shame,  
Or knowe my-selven fals, or lese my name,  
And with my deth I may be quit, y-wis.'

Since it was a choice between death and dishonor, she purposed

1. Hart, Franklin's tale, p. 189.

Arvergne, "the worthy man of arms, the flower of chivalry,"  
 returned home the heart of Dorigen was filled with bliss.  
 Faithful to her husband, she returned the advances of a  
 lusty young squire, servant to Venus, who, during Arvergne's  
 absence asked for her love.

'He shall I never been answer wot  
 In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;  
 I wot her his to whom that I am knit;  
 Take this for fynal answer as of me.'

But then, in a spirit of playfulness, she promised to love him  
 best of any man if he would remove all the rocks from the Brit-  
 tany coast, so that not a stone could be seen. And she added,  
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 "appearance" that all the rocks "weren y-voyaged everidoun".  
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 countenance, she wept and complained. Memory brought to mind  
 numberless women and girls who in former times had sacrificed  
 their lives for honor, and she decided,

'Wot I no socour  
 Save only death or elles dishonour;  
 Con of these two shalvethe me to chese.  
 But natheless, yet have I lever leas  
 My lyf than of my body have a shame,  
 Or knowe my-selfen false, or lese my name,  
 And with my beth I may be drit, y-wis.'

Since it was a choice between death and dishonor, she purposed



"ever that she wolde deye".

Arveragus held a different notion of honor. He said,

'Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe',  
and for that reason

'Ye shul your trouthe holden, by my fay.  
For god so wisly have mercy on me,  
I hadde wel lever y-styked for to be,  
For verray love which that I to yow have.  
But-if ye sholde your trouthe kepe and save.'

Dorigen accepted the decision and prepared to obey. Happily, the sense of honor which made her willing to keep her troth, when she would liefer die, impressed the young squire so deeply, that he released her from her agreement. He said,

'And here I take my leve,  
As of the trewest and the beste wyf  
That ever yet I knew in al my lyf.'

The medieval definition of honor must be the criterion for judging Dorigen's behavior when she placed her promise above marital fidelity. To be held responsible for a jesting word conditioned on a feat possible only to magic, seems unreasonable. Medieval readers, nevertheless, enjoyed the unravelling of such a dilemma,<sup>1</sup> and the twentieth century mind can admire the nobility which respects plighted troth, and which swears to its own hurt and changes not.

After the Wife and the Clerk had pictured marriages where one side or the other held mastery, came that of the Franklin who said,

'frendes everich other moot obeye,

1. Root, Poetry of Chaucer, p.176.

'friends every other most obey,

who said,

one side or the other held mastery, came that of the French  
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The medieval definition of honor must be the criterion for

That ever yet I knew in all my life.  
As of the present and the past was  
'And here I take my leave.

that he released her from her engagement. He said,

when she would later die, impressed the young squire so deeply

the sense of honor which made her willing to keep her word.

Dorigen accepted the decision and prepared to obey. Happily,

But if ye should your trowthe kepe and save,  
For verrey love which that I to you have,  
I hadde wel lever y-styked for to be,  
For God so wylly have mercy on me,  
'Ye shall your trowthe holden, by my say.

and for that reason

'Trowthe is the beste thing that man may kepe.'

Arveragus held a different notion of honor. He said,

"ever that she wolde leve".



If they wol longe holden companye.  
Love wol nat ben constreyned by maistrye.'

Courtly love was not compatible with marriage. A higher conception prevailed when it was said of Arveragus,

'he hath bothe his lady and his love;  
His lady certes and his wyf also,  
The which that lawe of love acordeth to.'

"The fidelity, which she would in medieval romance, have given her lover, she gave to her husband."<sup>1</sup> Chaucer opened to view an ideal marriage founded on "perfect equality and harmony",<sup>2</sup> trust and highmindedness, where each loved the other "as his owene hertes lyf". "The whole secret of the inspiration to gentle deeds on the part of every man in the tale....was the fidelity of a lady and her plighted word."<sup>3</sup> Plainly, Chaucer believed his two noble characters were able to achieve a successful marriage because they loved right supremely.

1. Hart, Franklin's tale, p.192.

2. Ibid, p.195.

3. Schofield, Chivalry in English literature, p.54.

Love will not long hold a course.  
If they will long hold a course.

Jointly love was not compatible with marriage. A higher con-  
ception prevailed when it was said of Arragon.

'He hath better his lady and his love;  
His lady certes and his wife also.  
The which that I have loved most to.'

"The fidelity, which she would in medieval romance, have given  
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2. Ibid., p. 193.  
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### Comparisons

Among the women of the Canterbury Tales are Madam Eglen-tyne, a Prioress, Dame Alysoun, a housewife and weaver, Princess Constance, daughter of the Roman Emperor, Emily, sister of Queen Hippolyta, Virginia, daughter of the knight Virginius, highborn Dorigen, and Griselda, who, emerging from a home of obscurity and poverty, becomes a marchioness. They are all real women. The Prioress and Wife of Bath stand out as clear-cut individuals. The others represent types. The individualized persons, as in real life, are complex, displaying contradictory traits. To portray the typical figures, only those characteristics are named which emphasize one ideal. Emily is the fair lady of romance, the desired reward of chivalrous conduct. Constance is the religious saint. Griselda embodies patient self-denial. Virginia subordinates life itself to chastity. Dorigen places her promised word above everything. Each of them is like a plant from which most of the buds have been sacrificed for the sake of one perfect flower.

At first thought, there could not be a greater contrast of character and personality than between the quiet, dainty, celibate nun and the loud-voiced, coarse, sensual Wife. The one was aristocratic, well-bred, and affected; the second democratic, natural, and frank. The whole tenor of the Prioress's life led away from sensuality. The dissimilar characteristics are evident, but were there not likenesses? Both were

## Comparisons

Among the women of the Canterbury Tales are Madam Eglamour, a prioress, Dame Alice, a housewife and weaver, the prioress, daughter of the Norman Emperor, Emily, sister of Queen Hippolyta, Virginia, daughter of the knight Sir Guy, knight of the shire, and Griselda, who, emerging from a home of obscurity and poverty, becomes a marchioness. They are all real women. The prioress and life of both stand out as outstanding individuals. The others represent types. The individualized persons, as in real life, are complex, displaying contrasting traits. To portray the typical figures, only those characteristics are named which emphasize one ideal. Emily is the fair lady of romance, the desired reward of chivalrous conduct. Griselda is the religious saint. Virginia exudes patient self-denial. Virginia subordinates life itself to chastity. Hippolyta places her promised word above everything. Each of them is like a plant from which most of the buds have been sacrificed for the sake of one perfect flower. At first thought, there could not be a greater contrast of character and personality than between the quiet, demure, celibate nun and the loud-voiced, coarse, sensual wife. The one was aristocratic, well-bred, and educated; the second demotic, natural, and frank. The whole tenor of the prioress's life led away from sensuality. The dissimilar characteristics are evident, but were there not likenesses? Both were



self-centered; the Prioress's ruling passion was to receive reverence; that of the Wife was to hold the mastery, to rule her own household and to take precedence at the offering or at social gatherings. Both were fond of dress, whether it was a case of well-pinched wimple and ten-pound headdress, or fetis cloke and scarlet gyte. Both enjoyed society. No ecclesiastical pressure forbidding pilgrimages could keep the pleasant and amiable nun within her cloister. Life to Alys of Bath would not have been worth living had it deprived her of gadding about. Diametrically opposite as they were in manner and in station, Madam Eglentyne and Dame Alysoun were yet, in some respects, sisters under the skin.

Emily and Virginia were two girls of conventional beauty and freshness. One loved out-of-door activity, the garden and the woods; the other preferred to stay at home. Emily, longing to remain a maiden, and Constance, trembling at the thought of the strange man she was destined to wed, are true to life.<sup>1</sup>

Griselda, Constance and Dorigen were cut from the same pattern. They were all high-minded women who met life's obligations with honesty and good purpose and whose characters were made more nearly perfect through suffering. Griselda's fate was to merge her individuality into that of another; Constance's was to face life alone. Each of them followed the path of duty.

1. Hadow, *Chaucer and his times*, p. 128.

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### Children

There were no children among the Canterbury Pilgrims. Since this was not a family expedition mothers of young children were not in the group. Only three women, two of whom were nuns, were included in the company; and, as far as their choice of stories was concerned, most of the men were not of the type to take an interest in boys and girls. Moreover, it was the custom of the times to ignore children. Usually, those who appeared in the Pilgrim's tales were little more than stage furniture for the use of the men and women actors. They were necessary to the plot and were moved on and off without regard to their personalities. In their own right they were not important.

### Maurice

The infant Maurice, Constance's baby, enhanced the sorrowful departure of his mother and himself from their home by weeping. He was five years old when they landed in Italy. His close resemblance to Constance was the means of bringing his father and mother together, for Constance, hearing of King Alla's visit, put the child in his way. When his grandfather saw him,

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he looked steadily  
Up-on this child, and on his daughter's portrait.  
Maurice was made emperor of Rome by the Pope, and during his



reign did great honor to the Church.

### Griselda's Children

Griselda's children remained on the stage but a short time when they were whisked away not to reappear until the daughter was twelve and the son seven or eight years old. They were brought home ostensibly that the daughter might become the marquis' new wife. Everyone thought them beautiful. Ultimately the daughter was married to a lord, one of the worthiest of all Italy. The young brother, in due time, succeeded to his father's title. Evidently he had not inherited the marquis' suspicious streak, for the Clerk states that he did not put his wife to such tests as his mother had suffered.

### Little Clergeon

The "littel clergeon" of the Prioress's tale was an exception to the general rule, for he became the martyr-hero of the story. The little seven-year old was a quiet, good child. He was naturally inclined to be religious, and always remembered his mother's teaching to kneel and say his "Ave Marie" wherever he saw an image of the Virgin Mary. One day in school, while studying his primer, he heard the other children singing Alma Redemptoris from their anthem book. Something about the hymn fascinated the child so that he forgot his own lesson and drew nearer and nearer to listen to the words and the music till he knew the whole of the first verse by heart. As he was too young to have learned any Latin, he besought one of his older

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mates to translate the words to him and tell the purpose of the song. Many times upon his knees he begged him to explain the unknown words. The older boy answered that he had heard say the song had been written about "our blisful lady free", to greet her and also to pray her "to been our help and socour when we deye". That was all that he could explain; he was learning songs, and knew "but smal grammare". When the clergeon heard this, he resolved to learn the whole hymn e'er Christmas was past to honor "our lady". He would certainly do it even though he got scolded for neglecting his primer and was beaten thrice in an hour. So, day by day, as they walked home from school, the "felaw" taught the hymn to the small clergeon, until he knew it all by heart. Twice a day, "to scoleward and homward", with whole-hearted adoration for the sweet Virgin "ful merrily....wolde he singe and crye O Alma redemptoris evermo". Alas, his zeal brought about his death and he was martyred for his religious devotion. By a miracle the song continued to come from his cut throat until a grain that had been placed on his tongue by the Virgin had been removed. His body was placed in a marble tomb.

#### Older Clergeon

His "felaw", the older clergeon, was a child of a different type, the usual, red-blooded schoolboy. He felt flattered to be consulted in regard to the hymn, explained what he knew about it, and obligingly taught it to the eager child on the way home from school. As for himself, however, he was not sufficiently

mates to translate the words to him and tell the purpose of the song. Many times upon his knees he begged him to explain the unknown words. The older boy answered that he had heard say the song had been written about "our blessed lady Mary", to greet her and also to pray her "to be our help and comfort when we die". This was all that he could explain; he was learning songs, and knew "but small grammar". When the older boy heard this, he resolved to learn the whole hymn for Christmas was past to honor "our lady". He would certainly do it even though he got scolded for neglecting his primer and was beaten twice in an hour. So, day by day, as they walked home from school, the "fellow" taught the hymn to the small classmate, until he knew it all by heart. Twice a day, "to schoolward and homeward", with whole-hearted adoration for the sweet Virgin "ful merily.... would he sing and cry O Alma redemptoris mater". Alas, his zeal brought about his death and he was martyred for his religious devotion. By a miracle the song continued to come from his out throat until a grain that had been placed on his tongue by the Virgin had been removed. His body was placed in a marble tomb.

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interested in the song to find out its full meaning; it was a school lesson and nothing more. He lacked "the divine spark of his younger comrade".<sup>1</sup>

II. Customs, ideals, conventions regarding women

1. Root, Poetry of Chaucer, p. 198.

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## Education

The chief representative of education was the Prioresse of the Convent of Saint Leonard's, Bromley, in Middlesex, adjoining Stratford. The Convent had a high reputation as a fitting school for the daughters of London citizens. In contrast to its neighbor, the Abbey of Barking, which was patronized by the aristocracy. The prioresse's etiquette, her French, her singing and chanting are products of the training given at such a school. Her table manners accorded with the teaching of the

## II. Customs, ideals, conventions regarding women

She lost no moment from his lippen falls,  
He wote his fingring in his namee dops.  
Tel anon she cario a morsel, and wel knew,  
That he drope as fillis up-on his breast.  
In cariousse was not fel muche his lest.  
His over lippe wyped she as alone,  
That in his dops was no ferthing some  
Of grace, than she drunken hadde his draughte.  
Fel anon after his wote she raughte.

The French which she knew was, probably, the dialect of Flanders introduced by the sister of Queen Philippa, Lady Elizabeth, who, it is known, was a nun in the Convent of Saint Leonard's for many years.<sup>1</sup> Possibly, it should not be expected that a school looking after aristocratic patronage, at least, would know anything of the French. Probably Saint Leonard's copied its neighbor, the Abbey of Barking, which was closely in touch with royalty.<sup>2</sup>

1. *Early English Texts*, p. 304.

2. *Early English Texts*, p. 308-9.

II. Customs, habits, conventions regarding women



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She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,  
 Ne wette hir fingres in hir sauce depe.  
 Wel coude she carie a morsel, and wel kepe,  
 That no drope ne fille up-on hir brest.  
 In curteisye was set ful muche hir lest.  
 Hir over lippe wyped she so clene,  
 That in hir coppe was no ferthing sene  
 Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.  
 Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.

The French which she knew was, probably, the dialect of Hainaut introduced by the sister of Queen Philippa, Lady Elizabeth, who, it is known, was a nun in the Convent of Saint Leonard's for many years.<sup>1</sup> Possibly, it should not be expected that a school lacking aristocratic patrons, attendants at court, would know Parisian French. Probably Saint Leonard's envied its neighbor, the Abbey of Barking, which was closely in touch with royalty.<sup>2</sup>

1. Manly, Canterbury tales, p. 504.

2. Kuhl, Notes on Chaucer's Prioress, p. 302-9.

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She lost no word from his lips  
He wrote his fingers in his sense deep.  
Well could she call a morsel, and well keep,  
That no drop no little up on his breast.  
In courtesy was set his hands his feet.  
His over lippe wiped she so close,  
That in his scope was no learning none  
Of grace, when she broken had his draughts.  
And solemnly after his note she taught.

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Its Prioress ambitiously took pains "to countrefete chere of court". As was customary, "she song the service divyne entuned in hir nose" for the purpose of easing the strain on her throat.<sup>1</sup> In her profession she was promoting religious education.

The school in her story was the ordinary grammar school of the time, where reading and singing were taught. The chief end of the training which it gave was the ability to participate in the church service. The little clergeon was reading Psalms and litanies from his primer. His older mate was learning to sing and read Latin. The grammar which they would study later "included not only the study of inflections and constructions, but also the interpretation of the works read."<sup>2</sup>

The Wife of Bath was sufficiently acquainted with the Bible to base arguments on its teachings. Had she learned it from attendance at church services, vigilies, preeching, pilgrimages, and pleyes of miracles? She had gathered a smattering of learning from the book owned by Jankin out of which he read her classical stories, and she was familiar with the Arthurian legend. In her respect for learning she was always referring to "auctoritee" and, thanks to Chaucer's humor, she made her fairy heroine quote from classical "auctoritees". The Wife must also have added to her knowledge from "wandering by the weye" on her numerous pilgrimages to France, Spain, Italy and Palestine.

1. Manly, Canterbury tales, p. 504.

2. Ibid., p. 625; Brown, Chaucer's "litel clergeon", pp. 467-491.

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### Love and Marriage

They were highly romantic, mystical tales that some of the Pilgrims told, and they must not be too drastically subjected to cold reason. Palamon and Arcite lost their hearts to a beautiful maiden whom they saw at a distance. Even more quixotic was the soldan who fell in love with an imaginary girl whom his fancy created out of hearsay. Of the lady of high degree, acquiescence was expected, obedience to her superiors, both before and after marriage. Duke Theseus, the older brother-in-law, managed Emily's affairs; no choice was allowed as to which suit-or she would marry, or whether she would refuse both. Her fate depended on the outcome of the tournament, and when the victor died, she was handed over to his rival. Because Palamon had suffered great adversity for her, she was advised that she ought to exceed mere justice and show him mercy by marrying him. To Griselda, strange to say, it was permitted to decide whether or not she would marry the marquis, but since royal invitations are virtually commands, there may, actually, have been little choice. The marquis's proposal breathed the very spirit of feudalism. Would she promise to yield to his wish in everything, regardless of whether he thought best to cause her to laugh or smart, and never to grumble or disagree with him either by word or by frowning countenance? So great an opportunity for the "destruccioun of Maumetrye" and "encrees of Cristes lawe" was given by the soldan's desire to wed Constance,

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that the marriage was arranged,

by tretis and embassadrye,  
And by the popes mediacion  
And al the chirche, and al the chivalrye.

Certain conventions of the courtly love system appear in the tales of the Knight and the Franklin.<sup>1</sup> Emily's beauty, entering by way of their eyes, stung the hearts of Arcite and Palamon with love wounds. They risked their lives in jousting to win her. To the young men she seemed cold and indifferent. The Duke reminded her of the fidelity of,

'That gentil Palamon, your owne knight,  
That serveth yow with wille, herte and might,  
And ever hath doon, sin that ye first him knewe',

and urged her that of her grace she should,

'upon him rewe,  
And taken him for housbonde and for lord'.

Arveragus had wrought "many a labour, many a greet empyrse" to please his lady; he obeyed her and followed her will in everything "as any love to his lady shal". Aurelius loved in secret. "Viewed from the medieval point of view, there was nothing unusual in his falling in love with Dorigen". As a matter of fact, "Her scorn of Aurelius for loving another man's wife, must have sounded strange in his ears".<sup>2</sup> Courtly love did not lead to marriage. In departing from that principle, Chaucer elevated his stories to a higher plane than those of his contemporaries.

It was supposed that love ceased with marriage because of

1. Dodd, Courtly love in Chaucer and Gower, pp. 232-248.
2. Hart, Franklin's tale, p. 192.

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the inevitable mastery in marriage. As the Franklin expressed the idea,

'Whan maistrie comth, the god of love anon  
Beteth hise winges, and farewel! he is gon!'

Constance learned early in life that,

'Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,  
And to ben under mannes governance',

and she experienced the full bitterness of the sentiment when she was obliged to sacrifice, not only herself, but her child also, in obedience to her husband's supposed command. Griselda must always think in accordance with her lord's will. Even Dorigen acted on Arveragus' decision without a word. Yet the poet who revealed so truly the society of his time, could also paint a picture of perfect marriage relations, where there was no spirit of mastery, but mutual love and trust and faithfulness.

Kittredge finds in the Canterbury Tales a planned series of stories on the theme of sovereignty in marriage.<sup>1</sup> The Wife of Bath begins with the proposition that woman should have the mastery, and tells a story to prove it. The Clerk of Oxford tells an exemplum in which he pictures the model woman invariably submissive to her husband. The Franklin brings the series to a close by showing the ideal relations between husband and wife to be those of equality, forbearance and service. Hinckley disagrees in regard to Chaucer's having planned the stories to develop the marriage theme and believes the Clerk<sup>2</sup>

1. Chaucer's discussion of marriage, pp. 435-467.

2. Debate on marriage in the Canterbury tales, p. 304.

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1. Chaucer's discussion of marriage, pp. 455-467.  
2. Debate on marriage in the Canterbury Tales, v. 364.



had no thought of answering the Wife of Bath. Be that as it may, it enhances the lifelikeness of the Tales to consider them a dramatic unit in which the characters react to one another's opinions and state their own spontaneously.

"I hope his father lyf on luffe  
With everich cheynesse and diligence  
That child may love to father reverence."

Constance leaving home bids her father and mother farewell:

"Be shall I never see you more with ye.  
Allan! go to the barke anon  
I wote well, and that it is your wille."

Chaucer, in a touching scene, pictures the comradeship between Virginia and her mother's father, their love for each other, powerful, but exceeded by the still stronger ideal of integrity and uprightness which guides their aims.

Three girls, Constance, Griselda, and Derigen, contributed their share toward the maintenance of happy homes. Derigen was as less devoted to her husband than Griselda, but because of the recognition of equality between them, was able to achieve a happier home. "Chaucer realizes that for women, marriage is even more of a lottery than for men". "This poet, who sees so clearly the dangers and evils of matrimony, has left us one of the most perfect pictures of married life at its best", that of Derigen and Arveragus.

The atmosphere of the home presided over by the irrefragable Wife of Bath must often have been lively, and, doubtless,

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## Home Life

A few glimpses of the home life of the story characters are given. Of the three daughters, Griselda,

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With everich obeisaunce and diligence  
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Constance leaving home bade her father and mother farewell;

'Ne shal I never seen yow more with ye.  
Allas! un-to the Barbre nacioun  
I moste anon, sin that it is your wille'.

Chaucer, in a touching scene, pictures the comradeship between Virginia and her austere father, their love for each other, powerful, but exceeded by the still stronger ideal of integrity and uprightness which guides their acts.

Three wives, Constance, Griselda, and Dorigen, contributed their share toward the maintenance of happy homes. Dorigen was no less devoted to her husband than Griselda, but because of the recognition of equality between them, was able to achieve a happier home. "Chaucer realises that for woman, marriage is even more of a lottery than for man". "This poet, who sees so clearly the dangers and evils of matrimony, has left us one of the most perfect pictures of married life at its best", that of Dorigen and Arveragus.<sup>1</sup>

The atmosphere of the home presided over by the irrepressible Wife of Bath must often have been lively, and, doubtless,

1. Hadow, Chaucer and his times, pp. 127-8.

# Home Life

A few glimpses of the home life of the story characters

are given. Of the three daughters, Griselda,

keeps her father's eye on her  
with ever watchful eyes and diligence  
That child may soon to father resemble.

Constance leaving home bids her father and mother farewell:

'He shall I never see you more with ye.  
Alas! un-to the Barre nation  
I muste know, ain that it is your willin'.

Chambers, in a touching scene, pictures the comradeship between

Virginia and her austere father, their love for each other,

powerful, but exceeded by the still stronger ideal of integrity

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Three wives, Constance, Griselda, and Virginia, contributed

their share toward the maintenance of happy homes. Virginia was

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Virginia and Arvergne.

The atmosphere of the home presided over by the irrepress-

ible Wife of Bath must often have been lively, and, doubtless,



uncomfortable. On her side were selfishness, deceit and determination to hold mastery, which she could secure by physical strength if necessary. She inveigled all their property away from the old men and scolded them shamelessly. With the fourth, she held a contest in unfaithfulness, herself enjoying gay company under pretense of watching him jealously. Even Jankin, whom she loved, she could not live peaceably with until she held the whip.

Chaucer has painted three beautiful mothers. Constance soothed her baby tenderly as she boarded the ship, longing that he might be left in safety. Griselda lovingly caressed her children who, she supposed, were soon to die, and radiantly welcomed them home after the long absence.

'O tendre, o dere, o yonge children myne,  
Your woful mooder wende stedfastly  
That cruel houndes or som foul vermyne  
Hadde eten yow; but god, of his mercy,  
And your benigne fader tendrely  
Hath doon yow kept'.

The little clergeon's mother watched for him all night and at daylight,

With face pale of drede and bisy thoght  
She hath at scole and elles-wher him soght,

and

She gooth, as she were half out of hir minde,  
To every place wher she hath supposed  
By liklihede hir litel child to finde.

In such pictures can we read Chaucer's high regard for womanhood.

uncomfortable. On her side were selfishness, deceit and deception to hold mastery, which she could secure by physical strength if necessary. She inveigled all their property away from the old man and seduced them shamelessly. With the fourth she held a contest in water-buoyancy, herself enjoying her company under pretence of watching him jealously. Even Jack, whom she loved, she could not live peacefully with until she held the whip.

Chaucer has painted three beautiful pictures. Constance soothed her baby tenderly as she boarded the ship, longing that he might be left in safety. Griselda lovingly caressed her children who, she supposed, were soon to die, and radiantly welcomed them home after the long absence.

'O tender, O dear, O young children mine,  
Your world would never be so kind  
That cruel hounds or men should harm you  
Kiss them now; but God, of his mercy,  
And your benign father tenderly  
Hath been your keep.'

The little stepson's mother watched for him all night and at daylight.

With face pale of dread and day thought  
She bath at noon and eke when him sought.

and

She goeth, as she were half out of her mind,  
To every place where she hath supposed  
By likelihood her little child to find.

In such pictures can we read Chaucer's high regard for womanhood.



## Children

Upon the birth of Constance's baby, the happy news was written to the absent father, and the message announced thus to the grandmother:

'Madame,...ye may be glad and blythe,  
And thanke god an hundred thousand sythe;  
My lady quene hath child, with-outen doute,  
To joye and blisse of al this regne aboute.'

Judging from our group of stories, children were not heard in fourteenth century society; in fact, they were seldom seen. Events were not shaped for their benefit; the effect that acts might have on them was not taken into consideration, either for their immediate happiness and welfare, nor for the sake of what they might become. No one thought to question, for instance, the effect on Griselda's children of being separated from their mother and reared by others. Nor did anyone imagine how it would injure the girl to be admired and honored as a prospective bride, and then, suddenly, to be subordinated to the daughter's place. As life itself was rather lightly regarded, so the development of personality was ignored.

1. Fowler, *Medieval people*, p. 115.

2. Wolff, *Chaucer's work*, p. 116.

3. Waley, *Chaucer's tales*, p. 207.

## Children

Upon the birth of Constance's baby, the happy news was written to the absent father, and the message announced thus to the grandmother:

'Welcome... we may be glad and bright,  
And thank God an hundred thousand times;  
My lady gave birth child, with-outer doubt,  
To joy and bliss of all this realm about.'

Judging from our store of stories, children were not heard in fourteenth century society; in fact, they were seldom seen. Events were not shaped for their benefit; the effect that one might have on them was not taken into consideration, either for their immediate happiness and welfare, nor for the sake of what they might become. No one thought to question, for instance, the effect on Elizabeth's children of being separated from their mother and reared by others. Nor did anyone imagine how it would injure the girl to be admitted and honored as a prospective bride, and then, suddenly, to be subordinated to the daughter's place. As life itself was rather lightly regarded, so the development of personality was ignored.



### Dress and Personal Belongings

The conventional beauty of Chaucer's day had golden hair with blue eyes; the Prioress's "straight nose, grey eyes and little red mouth" conform to "the courtly standard".<sup>1</sup> All the story heroines were exceedingly fair. The Prioress wore a handsome cloak, with a collar or wimple "of white linen, accordion plated or 'pinched' to fit closely around the neck and over the shoulders". It is made "in such manner that each plait forms a circle and the whole wimple is a series of concentric circles. The mystery of its achievement might well defy the feminine mind; its neat and supple tidiness would scarce escape even the masculine eye. Small wonder, then, that Chaucer directs the attention of five hundred years to the well-pinched wimple."<sup>2</sup> Manly thinks the coral and green beads could not have been very expensive,<sup>3</sup> but Sister Madeleva reminds us that they "were the work of medieval handicraft rather than twentieth-century machines, an explanation quite sufficient to account for their exquisite beauty. Only one who has seen the large variety of beads in common use among Catholics can appreciate how lovely this particular pair must have been. The spirit of poverty would forbid a Sister to-day to use anything so elaborate, but in the days when things were not only useful but beautiful,

1. Power, Medieval people, p.72.

2. Wolff, Chaucer's nuns, p.16.

3. Manly, Canterbury tales, p.507.

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1. Power, *Medieval People*, p. 172.  
 2. Wolff, *Chaucer's Works*, p. 16.  
 3. Henry, *Sanctuary Tales*, p. 807.



this pair of beads may not have been such an extravagance".<sup>1</sup>

"The 'broche' itself, hanging from the beads, was undoubtedly a medal, one of the commonest sacraments in the Catholic church. It is a small object, much like a locket, bearing engraving and inscription of a religious nature. In itself it has no virtue; its value lies in the fact that it reminds the owner or bearer of some truth of religion and so inspires him to virtue....The Prioress's 'broche' is a good but not an over-elaborate, medal."<sup>2</sup>

The decorative A was often seen in such places. "Amor" was constantly used for divine love. The motto, says Sister Madeleva, is "in three words, the most typical....that could have been engraved upon the brooch".<sup>2</sup> Another opinion is that it was the slogan "of the order in which the religion and the chivalry of the day may be said to have met and kissed each other; 'Love conquers all things', --at the best an ambiguous motto for a religious fine lady."<sup>3</sup> And Lowes sees that the "brooch on the rosary sums up in a master-stroke the subtle analysis of the Prioress' character--the delicately suggested clash between her worldly and her religious aspirations."<sup>4</sup> Several little dogs belonging to the Prioress ran along with the procession of Pilgrims.

In contrast to the Prioress's quiet elegance of dress came the showiness of the Wife of Bath. She herself spoke of her

1. Wolff, Chaucer's nuns, p.18.

2. Ibid, pp.19,20.

3. Browne, Chaucer's England, p.179.

4. Prioress' oath, p.375.

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1. Wolff, *Chaucer's name*, p. 18.  
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 19, 20.  
 3. Brown, *Chaucer's England*, p. 175.  
 4. *Friar's*, edn. 2, 175.



gay, scarlet gowns. The coverchief she was accustomed to wear on Sundays, consisting of many folds of fine cloth stretched over a wire frame and decorated with gold ornaments, Chaucer dared swear weighed ten pounds.<sup>1</sup> On top of that she wore a hat as broad as a buckler. Her foot-mantle for riding astride was shaped to cover the feet, like the modern child's winter sleeping garment. She wore fine scarlet stockings and well greased new shoes. The sharp spurs must have been entirely for show on such an ambling ride as this.

When the fair Emily wandered in the garden on May mornings, her yellow hair was "broyded in a tresse, behind her bak, a yerde long", the knight guessed, but she left it unbraided and crowned with a wreath of oak leaves while she was sacrificing in Diana's temple. When she went hunting, she was "clothed al in grene".

The beautiful clothes which the marquis furnished for Griselda's wedding were trimmed with jeweled ornaments. With them went gold and azure brooches and rings set with gems.

1. Fairholt, Costume in England, pp.166-172.

gay, beaded gown. The coverlet she was accustomed to wear  
on Sundays, consisting of many folds of fine cloth stretched  
over a wire frame and decorated with gold ornaments. Under  
dared wear weighed ten pounds. On top of that she wore a hat  
as broad as a bucket. Her foot-muffs for riding outside was  
shaped to cover the feet, like the modern child's winter sleep-  
ing garment. She wore fine beaded stockings and well pressed  
new shoes. The sharp spurs must have been entirely for show on  
such an evening ride as this.

When the fair lady wandered in the garden on May morning  
her fellow knight was "propped in a tree, behind her oak, a  
yard long", the knight guessed, but she left it unbridled and  
crowned with a wreath of oak leaves while she was sacrificing  
in Diana's temple. When she went hunting, she was "clothed as  
in green".

The beautiful clothes which the marquis furnished for  
Griseida's wedding were trimmed with jeweled ornaments. With  
them went gold and silver brooches and rings set with gems.



### Occupations

The occupations represented are those of housewife, cloth-maker and prioress. In poverty Griselda kept her father's cottage, spun and watched the sheep, and

Wortes or other herbes tymes ofte  
she carried home for food. After she became marchioness, the management of the palace rested on her shoulders.

She gan the hous to dighte,  
And tables for to sette and beddes make;....  
Preying the chambereres....  
To hasten hem, and faste swepe and shake;  
And she....  
Hath every chambre arayed and his halle.

Among the fourteenth century cloth-makers of England was a notable proportion of women.<sup>1</sup> Did Dame Alysoun pursue the trade in some factory of the little parish just outside the north gate of Bath; or, did she operate an establishment of her own? In conversation with one of her husbands, she referred to "our apprentice". Ward believes that "the extent of her wanderings, combined with the fact that her cloth surpassed that of the noted foreign weavers, suggests that she was an organizer and director of labour rather than a working artificer, as were the weaver, dyer, tapisser and others of the pilgrim band".<sup>2</sup> "Perhaps it was to a gild....that Chaucer refers when he represents the Wife as so angrily insistent upon her right of precedence

1. Manly, Canterbury tales, p.527.

2. Canterbury pilgrims, p.175.

## Conspicuous

The conspicuous represented the those of housewife, cloth-  
maker and mistress. In poverty Griselida kept her father's cot-  
tage, spun and washed the sheep, and

Forces or other narrow types of

she carried home for food. After she became marriageable, the  
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She gave the room to daylight,  
And labored for to settle and bedded make;....  
Trying the chamberlain....  
To hasten her, and taste were and shake;  
And she....  
With every chamber stayed and his hall.

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1. Manly, *Canterbury Tales*, p. 527.  
2. *Canterbury Tales*, p. 175.



at the 'offfrynge'". "At services the gild of wives must have offered as a body, for we read....of sums given by 'the Wives'. It may be that,--as Chaucer's words suggest, they went forward in a body, and his Wife always insisted upon leading the way".<sup>1</sup>

The vocation of prioress included much more than singing the "service divyne" and going "on pilgrimages to ferne halwes". Not only must the Superior furnish in her person an example of correct deportment and piety before the younger nuns, but she must uphold the dignity of her priory by dispensing hospitality to guests. She also had oversight of the farms belonging to her convent and other business affairs.<sup>2</sup>

1. Manly, Some new light on Chaucer, p.228.

2. Power, Medieval people, p.72.

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L. Henry, Some new light on Chaucer, p. 225.  
 S. Power, Medieval people, p. 17.



### Amusements

The true purpose of the present pilgrimage, it is safe to say, was as much pleasure as spiritual profit. An irresistible longing had seized the nine and twenty Pilgrims to be on the road those sunny April days where the sweet-breathed zephyrs were blowing among the tender new shoots of wood and heath and small birds were making melody. Much of the enjoyment consisted in fellowship, too, and they rode merrily along, laughing, singing, japing and amusing themselves at the ancient pastime of story-telling.

The narrators referred to various kinds of entertainments and sports. Weddings took place in four of the stories, probably, as in the case of the Wife of Bath, on the church porch. A tournament, favorite sport of that golden age of chivalry, was witnessed by Emily, herself the fair prize. She liked to be up with the sun and spend the morning in the garden or the woods or riding with a hunting party. The merry Alys of Bath was fond of dancing, of attending miracle plays and of visiting from house to house listening to stories and gossip. The excitement and socialibility of pilgrimages led her three times to excursions of a year's duration. When Dorigen was lonely and mournful at the absence of Arveragus, her friends devised plans to drive away her dark fantasies; they danced and sang, held all-day picnics, went walking by the sea and in the garden which the "craft of mannes hand so curiously arrayed hadde",

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and they played chess and backgammon. Perhaps music was the Prioress' hobby.

### Pilgrimage

The Pilgrims were religious and their journey was a religious journey. They were going to the holy, blissful martyr's shrine seeking relief from burdens of sin, for healing of infirmities or to fulfill vows made in gratitude for help previously received when they had been sick. The seven stories under consideration all contain references to the holy, and all around a moral theme. Half of them have Christian themes. The King of France's tale "is a pious romance of the adventures, sufferings, and final triumph of a Christian heroine over the machinations of her wicked mother-in-law and other malignant enemies. The story was very popular in the Middle Ages." The Prioress's story recalls a miracle of the Virgin Mary, possible by the devotion of a little Christian boy. The Prioress herself represents idealism; Constance embodies the spirit of Christianity. Emily, who belonged in ancient Greek days, placed her sacrifice on Diana's altar with all the accompanying paraphernalia and ceremony, and was rewarded for her devotion by a visit from the goddess. Derigun prayed to God for Arveragus' safety, and in the same story Laurence made his petition to Apollo. The story tellers quote from the Bible and refer to Church festivals, as Lent, and to miracle plays, vigils, sermons, processions and pilgrimages to sacred shrines.

1. Marlow, *Canterbury Tales*, p. 565.

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## Religion

The Pilgrims were reticent about the religious purpose of their journey. Were they going to the holy, blissful martyr's shrine seeking relief from burdens of sin, for healing of infirmities or to fulfil vows made in gratitude for help previously received when they had been sick? The seven stories under consideration all contain references to the Deity, and all sound a moral tone. Half of them have Christian themes. The Man of Law's tale "is a pious romance of the adventures, sufferings, and final triumph of a Christian heroine over the machinations of her two wicked mothers-in-law and other incidental enemies. The story was very popular in the Middle Ages"<sup>1</sup>. The Prioress's story recounts a miracle of the Virgin made possible by the devotion of a little Christian boy. The Prioress herself represents ecclesiasticism; Constance embodies the spirit of Christianity. Emily, who belonged in ancient Greek days, placed her sacrifice on Diana's altar with all the accompanying paraphernalia and ceremony, and was rewarded for her devotion by a visit from the goddess. Dorigen prayed to God for Arveragus' safety, and in the same story Aurelius made his petition to Apollo. The story tellers quote from the Bible and refer to Church festivals, as Lent, and to miracle plays, vigils, sermons, processions and pilgrimages to sacred shrines.

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## Religion

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The stories contain instances of prejudice, superstition and the supernatural. Many of the Prioress's listeners would believe the popular tales, one of which she repeated, of the murder of a Christian child by the Jews. The Wife said the prayers and presence of limitours and other holy friars had frightened away the fairies and elves that inhabited the country in former times. In the midst of her story the ugly old woman was changed to a beautiful maiden. The distressing problem of the Franklin's tale hung on magic, by which rocks were made invisible. By the Virgin's miracle in the Abbess's story, the little clergeon continued his song after death.

The stories contain instances of prejudice, superstition and the supernatural. Many of the writers' listeners would believe the popular tales, one of which was repeated, of the murder of a Christian child by the Jews. The wife said the prayers and presence of lights and other holy things had frightened away the evil and given that inhabited the country in former times. In the midst of her story she said a woman was changed to a beautiful maiden. The disturbing presence of the Franklin's tale hung on me, by which books were made invisible. By the Virgin's miracle in the Abbey's story, the little elvish creature continued his song after death.



### Personal Character

"Chaucer....represented goodness as necessary to ideal gentlewomen. Noble ladies, he insisted,....should be....'womanly, benign and meek'. In this respect Chaucer established an English tradition...."<sup>1</sup> All our women, save one, are gentlewomen, and help form the basis for the tradition. They are always described as beautiful, not merely in physical form, but even more emphatically, in disposition and character. "Nas never swich another as is she"; "oone the fairest under sonne"; "a thousand-fold more virtuous was she". Amiability, courtesy, generosity and industry were common qualities. The repression of emotion was admirable. Obedience, first, in a general attitude toward social standards, and specifically, toward father or husband, was universally exacted. "Griselda merely put in practice what all her contemporaries held in theory".<sup>2</sup> It was unnecessary, therefore, for women to think for themselves. Whatever their capabilities or interests, they might not go beyond the limits of convention.

Just as the gentlewoman was required to be virtuous, so the common wife was expected to be a shrew.<sup>3</sup> This demand the Wife of Bath satisfied when she was trying to accomplish some purpose. "Sir olde kaynard, is this thyn array?"

1. Schofield, Chivalry in English literature, p. 62.
2. Root, Poetry of Chaucer, p. 259.
3. Hadow, Chaucer and his times, p. 125.

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1. Scholfield, *Chaucer in English Literature*, p. 62.  
2. Root, *Poetry of Chaucer*, p. 222.  
3. Bawson, *Chaucer and his Times*, p. 122.



'But tel me this, why hydestow, with sorwe,  
The keyes of thy cheste away fro me?'

'And yet eft-sones I hitte him on the cheke,  
And seyde, "theef, thus muchel am I wreke"'.  
While she was having her own way, Dame Alys was amiable enough.

After the final "debaat" with her last husband, she declared,

'God help me so, I was to him as kinde,  
As any wyf from Denmark un-to Inde,  
And also trewe'.

III. Significance

55  
But tell me this, why hastenest thou away from me?  
The key of thy chamber may I have?

And yet oftentimes I kissed him on the cheek,  
And said, "Sweet, thou hast made me I wish."

While she was having her own way, Jane Alys was satisfied enough.

After the final "Adieu" with her last husband, she declared,

"God help me so, I was to him as kind,  
As any wife from Denmark run-to land,  
and also true."



### Significance

The world in which our women found themselves lay in the grip of the feudal system. Society was composed of groups, communities attached to the courts, whose constituents were mutually dependent. The nobles protected, and, in turn, were supported by the peasants. No one lived unto himself alone. Strict conventions, courtesy and paternalism prevailed. If that condition lasted in general, it weighed especially heavily on the women. Society, so closely knit together, established customs which restricted its feminine members like an impenetrable, insurmountable wall.

### III. Significance

In comparison with modern privilege, therefore, the position of women in the Middle Ages was limited and narrow. Chaucer's women lacked freedom of action and thought. They were more conventional and dependent and held more beliefs in common than is the case of women now. Convention bound them to outward obedience and inward submission. The peasant's daughter could, perhaps, find plenty of manual labor at home and in industry. The aristocratic girl might be admitted either to marriage or the cloister, but she would not be consulted in the matter. For her, other vocations did not exist in the world. It would not have been possible for Emily, Virginia or Hawthorne to escape the life laid out for them by custom. No career was open as a substitute for marriage. Not even a year's pilgrimage to Jerusalem to permit infatuated but misguided

III. Generalization



### Significance

The world in which our women found themselves lay in the grip of the feudal system. Society was composed of groups, communities attached to the manors, whose constituents were mutually dependent. The nobles protected, and, in turn, were supported by the peasants. No one lived unto himself alone. Class consciousness, tyranny and paternalism prevailed. If that condition irked in general, it weighed especially heavily on the women. Society, so closely knit together, established customs which restricted its feminine members like an impenetrable, insurmountable wall.

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# Significance

The world in which our women found themselves lay in the grip of the feudal system. Society was composed of groups, communities attached to the manors, whose constituents were mutually dependent. The nobles protected, and, in turn, were supported by the peasants. No one lived unto himself alone. Class consciousness, tyranny and paternalism prevailed. It was a condition fixed in general, it weighed especially heavily on the women. Society, as already knit together, established customs which restricted the feminine members like an impenetrable, insurmountable wall.

In comparison with modern privilege, therefore, the position of women in the Middle Ages was limited and narrow. Their lives were marked by freedom of action and thought. They were more conventional and dependent and held more beliefs in common than is the case of women now. Convention bound them to outward obedience and inward submission. The peasant's daughter could, perhaps, find plenty of manual labor at home and in the district. The aristocratic girl might be committed either to marriage or the cloister, but she would not be committed in the matter. For her, other vocations did not exist in the world. It would not have been possible for Emily, Virginia or Gertrude to escape the life laid out for them by custom. No career was open as a substitute for marriage. Not even a girl's pilgrimage to Jerusalem to permit infatuated but undesired



suitors to desist from their attentions might ease their way. Education enough to manage her house would be all a girl need expect. Custom for all contingencies was fixed; originality and spontaneity had no place in the scheme.

The conventional manners of medieval women were determined by their attitude of mind. The same beliefs, religious, superstitious, social and ethical were common to all. If Griselda and Constance had changed places, the results would have been the same; and Virginia might have become another Dorigen. From their group would emerge no independent thinkers, no leaders in any kind of reform or progress. No educators, writers, social workers or politicians would rise from that source. Their gaze was directed backward toward a long procession of precedents. They, themselves, did not try to burst their prison; indeed, the possibility of any other condition than the status quo had not occurred to them. They were, therefore, without ambition or initiative. Whatever was, was right, and there was no more to say.

Because of their restraint behind the barriers of convention and custom, they were dependent on others. They lived in a man's world. Constance, when still young, recognized that it was woman's lot to be controlled by man. Dorigen, the freest of all the story wives, instinctively felt it the proper course to abandon her own judgment for that of Arveragus. Griselda was not the only mother whose rights and feelings were ignored. In Virginia's extremity, her mother's advice was unsought, and when Constance and her father were reunited after years of

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 was not the only mother whose rights and feelings were ignored.  
 In Virginia's extremity, her mother's advice was unthoughtful, and  
 when Constantine and her father were reunited after years of



separation, no mention was made of the mother. Women were protected under feudalism and chivalry from external danger, though not from domestic insult. Whatever treatment the lords of their lives were pleased to bestow, it was their fate to endure. Of themselves they were powerless to change their condition or direct their own lives to any appreciable extent. Their rights had not been taken into consideration, even among a race which exercised its genius to obtain rights.

The Wife of Bath furnished a flaming exception to the rule. She would not conform to existing standards nor be guided by public opinion, nor yield her rights. She remained unconventional, heretic, independent. Her rebellion was not passive but aggressive. She would have taken her place by the side of Susan B. Anthony in the struggle for freedom. In the group, then, was one who dared to stand out. At least she gave a blow to the confining wall which was destined in time to be overthrown.

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## Summary

Among the Canterbury Pilgrims were two interesting women. The first, Dame Agnès, was a large woman with fair, broad forehead, blue eyes, and small mouth. She was a widow and lived with her son and daughter-in-law. She was a good housewife and a good mother. She was a good friend to the poor and the sick. She was a good neighbor. She was a good citizen. She was a good Christian. She was a good woman. She was a good friend to the poor and the sick. She was a good neighbor. She was a good citizen. She was a good Christian. She was a good woman.

## Summary

A contrast to the first was Dame Alice, the wife of a knight. She was a small, dark woman with a large, red face, and a large, red nose. She was a widow and lived with her son and daughter-in-law. She was a good housewife and a good mother. She was a good friend to the poor and the sick. She was a good neighbor. She was a good citizen. She was a good Christian. She was a good woman.

Of the two women, Dame Alice was the more conventional.

VIENNA



### Summary

Among the Canterbury Pilgrims were two interesting women. Madam Eglentyne, the Prioress, was a large woman with fair, broad forehead, slender nose, blue eyes and small mouth. She wore a neat cloak with an accordion plaited wimple and from her arm hung a rosary of coral and green beads with an engraved gold brooch. She was accustomed to chant the divine service in the correct nasal tone, observed approved table manners, spoke a dialect of French taught at the convent school of Stratford, and was enthusiastic about music. In character, judging from her appearance on the pilgrimage, she was shallow and affected, as is instanced in her imitation of court manners, her oaths, her attention to dress and to the small dogs that accompanied her and in her disregard of certain rules of the Church. Her pathetic and pious story about a schoolboy who was martyred for his love to the Virgin, revealed a finer quality of character.

A contrast to the nun was Dame Alysoun, the Wife of Bath, a large, red-faced, middle-aged woman, gat-toothed and deaf. She wore a riding habit, scarlet stockings, new shoes with spurs, a hood and enormous hat. She laughed and carped with the other Pilgrims to whom she delivered an autobiographical discourse on the subject of marriage. In her tale she showed the delicate side of her nature, which was a compound of qualities bestowed by Venus and by Mars.

Of the story heroines Emily was the conventional fair

Summary

Among the Canterbury pilgrims were two interesting women. Madam Eglentyne, the prioress, was a large woman with fair, broad forehead, slender nose, blue eyes and small mouth. She wore a neat cloak with an ermine collar and a wimple and from her arm hung a rosary of coral and green beads with an engraved gold brooch. She was accustomed to chant the divine service in the correct nasal tone, conversed in approved table manners, spoke a dialect of French taught at the convent school of Bristow, and was enthusiastic about music. In character, judging from her appearance on the pilgrimage, she was shallow and affected, as is indicated in her imitation of court manners, her oaths, her attention to dress and to the small dogs that accompanied her and in her disregard of certain rules of the Church. Her pathetic and pious story about a monk who was martyred for his love to the Virgin, revealed a finer quality of character. A contrast to the nun was Dame Agnès, the wife of Bath, a large, red-faced, middle-aged woman, red-footed and deaf. She wore a riding habit, scarlet stockings, new shoes with spurs, a hood and enormous hat. She laughed and talked with the other pilgrims to whom she delivered an autobiographical discourse on the subject of marriage. In her tale she showed the delicate side of her nature, which was a compound of delicacy bestowed by Venus and by Mars. Of the story heroines Emily was the conventional fair



young maiden, the prize awarded to the victor of the tournament. All desirable characteristics were to be found in Virginia, the home-loving girl who accepted death for the sake of keeping her purity. Constance was the Christian saint who bore life's hard experiences in a spirit of meekness and faith. The virtues of patience and self-denial were personified in Griselda who merged her personality into that of her husband. Dorigen's faithfulness to her promise influenced all the characters in the story to noble deeds.

Griselda's children, Constance's small Maurice and the two clergeons make up the list of children of the Canterbury Tales. The little clergeon is the martyr-hero of the Prioress's tale. He memorized the Alma Redemptoris as a gift to the Virgin and sang the hymn twice a day between home and school paying for his devotion with his life.

The Prioress, head of the convent school of Saint Leonard's, herself an accomplished woman, is the chief representative of education in her person and in her story. Though few occupations save those in the factory, the home and the convent were open to women, amusements were varied. Religion was a prominent if sometimes superficial factor in the lives of the Pilgrims. The keynote of the medieval woman's life was obedience. Her marriage, her family relations, occupation, religion, her character were in tune with that, and accordingly, she rendered obedience to father or husband and to social custom from first to last. Only the Wife of Bath presumed to rebel against such domination and she gave blow for blow to gain the mastery her-

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The Prioresse, head of the convent school of Saint Leodegarius, herself an accomplished woman, is the chief representative of education in her person and in her story. Though few occasions save those in the story, the home and the convent were open to women, amusements were varied. Religion was a prominent if sometimes superficial factor in the lives of the fifteenth century. The keynote of the medieval woman's life was obedience. Her marriage, her family relations, occupation, religion, her character were in tune with that, and accordingly, she rendered obedience to father or husband and to social custom from first to last. Only the Wife of Bath presumed to rebel against such domination and she gave blow for blow to gain the mastery her-



self. Every gentlewoman possessed a virtuous character. Chaucer's descriptions of dutiful wives, loving daughters and tender mothers show his ideals of womanhood.

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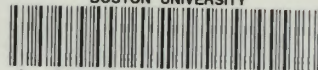








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